



WAGERS  
&  
WALLFLOWERS

ALYSSA  
CLARKE

SEDUCE ME,  
*If you Dare*

# Seduce Me, If You Dare

Book 3: Wagers and Wallflowers

Alyssa Clarke



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*For my family who rooted for me to write this series! For my amazing husband, who did all the cooking while I burrowed in the writing hut.*

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## Prologue

Miss Prudence Anna Merriweather did not have to marry for money. That much was evident in every detail of her attire tonight, from the jewel-tipped pins in her golden-streaked, dark brown hair to the elegant embroidery on her white dress and slippers. Her father might as well have put her on a velvet cushion and presented her to the fortune hunters of the *ton*. For it was one of them that she was expected to marry.

Not for money. Not for love, despite the open way her father doted on her mother. No, much the way her older sister, Mrs. Temperance Walters, had been given to a prominent businessman in her father's circle, Prue was expected to ignore her heart and stand up at the altar with whatever man was willing to give an heiress of her less-than-exalted pedigree a title.

It bemused her that something so permanent as marriage should be given only the consideration of performing a routine business transaction. A marriage arrangement of that sort was intolerable to Prue. She would never be able to respect a gentleman who would enter a marriage solely for money. Did the gentlemen who pursued ladies only for their wealth ever pause to consider a lady's likes and dislikes? It had been impressed upon her during the last several weeks what qualities she was to consider before accepting a proposal. These were exclusively a beau's connections, title, and his pedigree. It had to be the opposite of hers.

Recalling those instructions from her mother and her

indomitable aunt sent a fierce stab of pain inside her heart.

*Oh, but I want so much more!*

Prue wasn't going to fall in love in a ballroom like this, with sharks circling her. That was how she saw her would-be suitors, with their impeccable manners and flashing pearly white teeth. Their eyes were those of calculating predators, and she felt little interest in receiving their supposedly flattering attentions. Between her debut two such events ago and this ball, word had circulated about the depths of her father's pockets and how much he was leaving her. She had heard speculation on the amount of her dowry several times already this evening. It was humiliating. She couldn't take two steps without some dandy stepping into her path and offering her a drink or a tour around the room or a dance. But none of them looked at her while they did so. They looked past her, seeking the approval of her Aunt Beatrice—a baroness who had sponsored her debut—and fastening her to their arms like the pretty jewel she had been trussed up to be this evening.

*My debut was supposed to be different than this.*

With a sigh, Prue shut away the disappointing thoughts. After Temperance's arranged marriage, she shouldn't have expected anything different. Yet, she had.

By some miracle, she had managed to sidestep the suffocating attentions of the men and snubs of the women and found a private moment of peace near the half-open doors leading onto the terrace. Still indoors, but close enough for the air to cool her overheated flesh, Prue hid behind the inadequate cover of a potted fern.

*I am seventeen, not a child. I ought to be able to bear one more evening.*

And how many after that?

To her left was a row of seats where several chaperones and their charges waited for the possibility of a dance partner. Among them was a woman in her early twenties with fiery red hair and either too many freckles or too acerbic a tongue to attract any gentleman to stand up with her. A few who whispered with the

aim to wound had referred to her as a wallflower. Those ladies had spoken and giggled behind their fans, but the red-haired lady had steadfastly ignored their cruelty. Prue had been wishing to introduce herself all evening, hoping to find somebody who felt as outside the gathering as she did. Perhaps this was her opportunity?

Prue smoothed her gloves down her dress and patted at the edges of her hair. She wasn't as slim as most of the girls in the room, not that that had seemed to deter any of the gentlemen who looked her way. Just as she'd worked up her courage to take a step forward and join that line of potentially cutting ladies, *he* stepped out of the crowd.

Her heart stuttered alarmingly, and her body flushed. To her mortification, that reaction was provoked whenever she glimpsed the man. Prue knew who he was, of course, even if they hadn't been introduced. Everybody knew the devastatingly handsome and very eligible Earl of Wycliffe. His black hair curled devilishly onto his forehead, just far enough to shadow the color of his eyes, but his wicked smile and the cleft of his chin were enough to make him memorable. The way his shoulders filled out his evening coat was enough to make Prue's mouth dry.

Unfortunately, he hadn't been one of the men to cluster for her attention. Nor she realized, as he angled to walk past her, was she his aim tonight.

Instead, he approached the young woman with the fiery red hair who had been sitting down without a partner since arriving. At his approach, his glib tongue and the hand he extended to her, the woman's face brightened.

Prue felt a knot of warmth unravel just beneath her breastbone. Lord Wycliffe could have stood up with any woman in the room. He had the diamonds of the first water to choose from, though Prue knew with her rounded face and plump figure she wasn't among those beauties. A "gentleman" had baldly mentioned to her face that her appearance did not tempt him much, but she made up for it with her fortune. His condescension had shocked her. Just



once, she found herself longing to learn that a man needed her and not her money for his estate.

Prue's family might not have a title. She might not compare to the delicate English beauties in looks or refinement, despite the upbringing her father had tried to give her. But in terms of money? She was the richest heiress in the room.

*If the Earl of Wycliffe wanted you for your money, you wouldn't want him.*

As the gentleman in question offered the fiery young woman his arm, he happened to glance her way. From the ballroom proper, she was halfway shielded behind the potted fern and the graceful colonnade holding the orchestra aloft. From the position of the chairs where the chaperones sat, she was in plain view.

She felt the touch of his gaze like a brand. Her lips parted. Her fingers closed around the handle of her fan, the wood digging almost painfully through her glove as she fought not to hide her face. Not a single gentleman this evening had given her more than a cursory look, even the ones vying for her attention. But Lord Wycliffe *looked*. She supposed he tried to be discreet, but his gaze swept from the top of her intricate curls to the tips of her silver dancing shoes. And he lingered, as if he could not help himself. A frisson of awareness climbed down her spine and fluttering went off low in her belly.

Prue tried to turn away, but she stood there instead, returning his regard helplessly. His partner was standing now, yet his attention was still on Prue. At a word from the young woman, he turned away. The connection snapped, leaving her unexpectedly bereft. Even if the moment had been brief, the earl had stared at Prue like a man entranced. Suddenly finding it difficult to breathe, she moved blindly toward the terrace and the cooler night air beyond. The sky was overcast, and rather than being cool, the air was heavy and thick with summer heat, but she still found it preferable to being tethered like bait among tigers. Without thinking, she stepped past the couples sharing the short terrace.

Her slippers clicked on the stone steps. The sound gave way to the crunch of gravel as she found the garden path. It was well lit, the lanterns at intervals having only started to collect insects. She turned down a passage leading between two tall hedges until she found a bench. It faced a round planting of flowers, each bough and petal carefully trimmed and arranged so none spilled over the line of stones forming the perimeter. It was beautiful and artificial, like everything else she had seen tonight.

She fitted right in.

“There you are!”

Prue jumped at her older sister’s voice. She pressed her hand to her chest to quell the rapid beating of her heart. Temperance might have been the exact image of the mature woman Prue was meant to become. A touch slimmer, an inch taller, but with the same golden-brown hair that wouldn’t curl no matter how long the curling iron was pressed to it, the same sharp chin and pert tilt to her nose. Prue had dimples though, whereas her sister did not, a fact she never intended to let Temperance forget.

Though now Prue wasn’t in the mood to tease. Especially not when her older sister looked so playful. With poise and confidence that Prue envied, Temperance crossed to the bench and sat hip to hip with Prue. Grudgingly, Prue moved over to make a little more room.

“You’ll never catch a marriage proposal out here.”

Prue sighed. “I don’t even need to be in there. I might as well hold a placard with the amount of my dowry in place of my head. The men will start the bidding with or without me.”

Undaunted, Temperance reached forward and squeezed Prue’s hand. “It isn’t as bad as all that.”

She sounded as though she believed it.

Prue snorted. “I don’t think there’s a gentleman who has looked at me beyond the quality of my dress or jewelry this evening. Certainly, none of them have thought to ask after my temperament or personality. Half of them fish for my connections in the *ton* and

aren't satisfied until I tell them the date and time of Aunt Beatrice's marriage. And Papa expects me to marry one of them? Oh, Temperance, I want so much more."

"Your popularity is a blessing."

At that, Prue sighed. Even Temperance wasn't on her side this time.

Temperance leaned forward enough to companionably bump Prue's shoulder with her own. "It is," she insisted. "It means you can have your pick. It means you have a say."

For the first time in months, Prue recalled how frightened Temperance had been not to have a choice in her marriage. Despite how she'd threatened, she hadn't run away, but had faced the day with grace.

Softly, Prue whispered, "I don't want an arranged marriage. I most certainly do not want a man to marry me for my wealth. I want to marry for love. We must love each other. Isn't that what a union, especially one so permanent, should be based on?"

The confession hung thick in the air between them. Temperance mustered a smile. "It isn't all bad. You'll be well taken care of. You will be a Lady in the end, with a proper title and everything." She rearranged a lock of hair that had fallen free from one of Prue's pins. "You'll be the jewel of the family."

"I'd rather it had been you."

Temperance dropped her hand. "Papa needed my marriage to secure the business deal that made you into the heiress you are. Don't turn your nose up at my sacrifice now."

Despite the dour topic, her mouth turned up in a sly smile, and her tone was almost playful.

Prue looked her in the eye. "Are you happy?"

Perhaps she should have asked sooner, but she had been so terribly afraid of the answer.

Temperance looked contemplative, then an unexpected, dreamy smile touched her mouth. "Surprisingly...yes." She turned the word over on her tongue as if shocked to hear it aloud. "I was lucky."

Prue's throat tightened again. "I may not be."

Temperance shook her head. "I refuse to believe that. You have a choice. Tell me, isn't there any man you like?"

When Prue remained silent, Temperance turned bolder.

"I've seen you casting secret looks at the Earl of Wycliffe all evening, Prue. You might as well admit it."

She swallowed back the lump in her throat. Had she been that obvious in her admiration? Mortification swamped Prue and her cheeks heated against her will. "He is...handsome."

Knowingly, her sister asked, "*Only* handsome?"

Prue bit her lip to hide her smile. "More than handsome," she admitted. "Kind, too. He just stood up with a lady every gentleman has ignored all evening. I admit he makes my heart race. But he hasn't approached either me or Aunt Beatrice."

"Then perhaps you ought to approach him."

Prue glared at her sister. "That isn't helpful. You and I are both familiar with *ton* etiquette. It isn't done."

Temperance opened her mouth, but Prue cut her off. "We are grasping higher than our station just by being here. We cannot hope to align with an earl. Perhaps a baronet or baron, if we're lucky. I could repeat Aunt Beatrice's success."

Temperance turned her head, and for a moment, Prue thought she was reaching for a rejoinder. Instead, she simply stood, smoothed her gown, and offered Prue her hand. "I suppose you'd best be getting back."

She knew her sister was right, even if she wasn't looking forward to another excruciating evening.

She took her sister's hand, and from there, she wasn't quite sure what happened. Prue could be clumsy at times, but never this much. How she could both clasp her sister's hand and trip over her sister's foot at the same time, she'd never know. However, the jarring pain in her ankle and the angry throb in her knees as she hit the gravel were proof enough. A soft cry tore from her, and she struggled to stand to no avail. This was a disaster.

With a gasp, Temperance crouched beside her. “Prue, are you okay?”

Prue grimaced. “Yes,” she said between clenched teeth and reached for her sister’s hand again. She had no idea which devil of ill luck she had offended, but this time her hand slipped from Temperance’s altogether. When Temperance blindly grasped to catch her, this time by the sleeve, Prue heard a resounding rip.

The sudden wash of cool air against her bosom shocked her enough to look down. Her sleeve was ripped from the seam across her bodice, which now gaped enough to expose half of Prue’s breasts. She sat there, agape, unable to muster the sense to laugh. And laugh she must, because if she didn’t laugh, she would cry.

She was the coveted jewel no longer. Chipped and tarnished, abandoned in the dirt. She might as well be ruined. What would people say when they saw her like this?

Her sister’s hands flew to her mouth. “Stay here. *Don’t* move. I’ll be back in but a moment. I’ll—I’ll fetch your cloak and Aunt Beatrice, too. Just stay here and we’ll go home.”

At that moment, Prue wanted nothing more. She nodded, chin wobbling, and her sister dashed away, leaving her alone in the garden.

At least no one was around to witness her abject mortification.

The crunch of shoes on gravel came too quickly for Temperance to have left and returned, but Prue lifted her head, nevertheless.

And looked directly into the stunning dark brown eyes of the Earl of Wycliffe.

OSCAR OUGHT to turn his back. He’d had an exhausting evening paying court to all the young women with a better-than-modest dowry. Most, from titled families, knew their worth and perhaps even knew how desperately he had been trying to hold together his estate since inheriting it several years ago. He needed to marry an

heiress, and here was one tossed onto the ground at his feet, with her décolletage halfway undone already.

*Bloody hell.*

If only she wasn't bloody well seventeen. *Seventeen*, four years younger than his youngest sister, which was why he couldn't consider her—hadn't considered her. It made him feel ancient. No matter the size of her inheritance, how could he marry such a young bride? He was nine and twenty years old!

Even worse was how beautiful she was, pretty in a mischievous sort of way with the tilt to her mouth and the dimples winking in and out of her cheeks as she accepted the compliments of her empty-headed entourage. He hated himself for the momentary attraction he'd felt then—and more so for the surge of attraction he felt now. It trembled through him with stunning force and sucking in a harsh breath he looked away from her prettiness. And the plumpness of her décolletage.

Briskly, Oscar turned his back.

"Forgive me. I didn't know you were here."

That sounded like a weak excuse even to his ears. Not to mention, she was sprawled on the ground with her dress torn asunder! All thoughts of the curves hidden by the dress disappeared at once. He nearly turned around but reminded himself of the eyeful he would get if he did. Better if he preserved the illusion of the young woman's modesty. "Are you hurt?"

"No," she said hoarsely. "I'm lying on the ground of my own free will."

To his horror, he heard tears in her voice. Oscar had never known what to do with female tears, and his sisters shed them quite frequently with the right touch of histrionics.

She sniffled and said, "Oh, blast. Could this night get any worse?"

And that, as luck would have it, was when the rain started to fall.

The young lady gasped as the first droplets struck her. "Truly?"

she demanded rawly.

He shut his eyes and imagined she sent that incredulous demand to the heavens. What hell had he unwittingly wandered into? Oscar wished he had remained in the ballroom. Yet now that he was here, he could not leave her like this. "Are you able to walk?"

He heard the rustle of cloth, and then her small, watery voice. "I don't think so. My ankle hurts dreadfully and—"

Oscar cursed under his breath. With swift movements, he stripped himself out of his jacket and held it out to her. He stared at the hedge over her head as he waited for her to take it and tug it around her shoulders.

In a small voice, she whispered, "Thank you, my lord."

"You can call me Wycliffe. Most of my friends do." Most of his friends being the men he associated with at his club. Everyone there associated with each other by their titles, as if the man wearing it was of no concern. Even grown men he'd gone to Eton with now called him Wycliffe instead of Oscar. But he couldn't very well ask her to call him by his given name. Even though he knew the answer, he prodded, "And you are...?"

"Prue."

Her cheeks flushed as she realized she had given him her Christian name rather than her family name. Her stubborn chin came up. She didn't take it back. The rain was starting to thicken, and her dress was turning alarmingly transparent. At least his jacket covered her chest. Mostly.

"May I carry you, miss?" He was not going to call her Prue, even if he was fascinated by the curve of her lips as she spoke the word. "You cannot stay here."

"My sister will be here soon..." her words dwindled, and she lifted her face to the sky as the rain came harder.

Oscar swallowed his sigh. Fate was conspiring against them. "Your sister won't make it to the house and back with help before you're soaked through to the skin. Let me carry you around the

back of the house and find you someplace dry to sit. I'll fetch her for you then."

She didn't meet his eyes. Clutching with one hand at the lapels of his jacket, she turned her face away and nodded. He lifted her, doing his best not to notice the figure her dress was doing a poor attempt to hide. He recited old nursery rhymes in his head, jaw clenched, to distract himself as he made quick steps toward the house.

Unfortunately, he'd forgotten about the terrace. As unfamiliar as he was with this particular set of gardens, his only method of returning to the house was to retrace his steps, and that left them both in plain sight of the open terrace doors and the two women stepping out of them. Her sister and an older woman, both stopping in their tracks with gasps that rippled through the crowd behind them and drew more attention.

The older woman drew herself to her modest height and said sharply, as imperious as a queen, "Lord Wycliffe, what are you doing with my niece?"

Unfortunately, her voice carried. Quite deliberately. The glint in her eyes was calculating, and, for whatever reason, she was gambling on his honor. Prue turned her face into his shoulder, but from the shaking of her shoulders, he could tell that she had added up the consequences as quickly as he had. His reputation might survive—he was an earl, after all—but hers was in as poor a shape as her dress. Oscar could tell the truth. Leave the poor girl ruined, even more on the fringes of polite society than she already was. But that would be a very dishonorable thing to do, and the old biddy was hoping for that very reasoning to enter his head. He was bloody annoyed with the machinations of those caught up in the matrimonial fervor. It did not matter to them that marriage should be a beautiful union filled with comfort and respect. He was almost tempted to drop the delightful bundle in his arms on her buttocks, walk away and damn it all.

"Oh, God, I am going to be ruined," she whispered in the crook



of his neck, clearly stricken. "Please help me to explain—"

"Shh," he crooned, not understating the fierce urge that rose inside of him. "I'll protect you."

She jerked her face from his throat and tried to slither down. "I do not need you to rescue me!"

Oscar tightened his grip. "Pray recall that your ankle is hurt, miss."

He needed money to fix his estate, and this lady's family clearly wanted to net a title. A mutually beneficial agreement. Tightly, he said, "Forgive the impropriety, madam. I was having a moment alone with my intended when she fell and twisted her ankle. I had no choice but to take her into my arms."

The woman arched her brow, a hand fluttering to her chest. "Intended?"

Prue's sister stared with mouth agape. "You're going to marry her?"

She sounded shocked *and* delighted.

Without looking down at the young woman in his arms who sounded as if she were choking, Oscar said, "Yes."

But he would be damned if he touched the girl before she became a woman, wife or not.

### ***3 weeks later...***

SHE WAS NO LONGER Prue Merriweather but Lady Prudence Campbell, Countess of Wycliffe. The vicar had declared so, just a few hours ago. The wedding breakfast had finally ended, and the few guests who had attended their marriage at Fairfax Manor, the earl's principal estate in Hertfordshire, made their way back to their own homes.

Prue had escaped the elegantly decorated dining hall a few minutes ago and now sat on a bench in the lovely eastern gardens. The estate was grander than any home she had ever seen, and she was now its mistress. Nerves cramped her, and she pressed a

gloved hand over her mouth. She would be expected to manage this grand household and acquit herself well. Then she would have to bear the earl his heir and spare rather quickly, as per the advice of the dowager countess earlier this morning. It was clear to Prue that her husband's mother did not approve of her, something about her connections not being what she wanted for their family. Still, the dowager countess and his sisters had been polite as they welcomed her into the family.

Her mother had also cornered Prue an hour ago to inform her that tonight, doing her duty might seem frightening, but it can be pleasant if she relaxed. That cryptic message had been haunting her. What duty must she perform that could be perceived as frightening? Those questions had only caused her mama to lift her chin and walk away.

A rustle of sound had Prue whirling around. She blew out a sharp breath when her sister came into view. "I thought you were Wycliffe."

Even though she was not sure the earl would come looking for his new bride. He had barely paid her any attention at the breakfast table, and Prue couldn't help feeling he resented marrying her after all. Blast the man. She had found the courage to call upon him in London a few days after their mishap in the gardens and urged him to reconsider marrying her merely because they were compromised. Though she thought him very handsome and appealing, she had an idea of the kind of man she wanted to marry. One who would dote on her as she doted on him, one who shared the same love of poetry and the theatre, and one who was good-natured and affable.

Her cheeks stung at the memory of the earl's chilling indifference tinged with amusement when she had said she wanted to only marry for love.

*"Love..., how naïve. A marriage connection has nothing to do with love. Your limited views and understanding of how the world operates will change as you mature. You are still wet behind the ears if you do*

*not see that your reputation would be irrevocably ruined should you call the engagement off at this stage. Our alliance is a mutually beneficial one. There is certainly no need for this injured air as if you are losing something by becoming a countess!"*

The memory of those words now brought an ache to her throat. Clearly, this was not a man who believed in love. Her family had wanted an illustrious title, and they had got it, but how had the earl benefited? When she asked her papa, he had shushed her away, claiming that was the business of men, and she was not to concern her pretty head about these matters. And her mother had supported his ridiculous assertions.

"Why are you hiding away here?" Temperance asked with a quick frown as she sat on the bench.

"I am not hiding," Prue said. "I am breathing."

"Your guests are leaving, and you are not by your husband's side bidding them a safe journey."

Prue sighed. "He said I looked a bit wan, and I should retire. I am taking his advice."

Her sister smiled. "I think your earl meant you should retire to the bedchamber to rest for tonight."

*Tonight?* Prue's heart lurched. Of course, her sister would know the truth of it; she was also a married woman! "Mama mentioned that tonight will be frightening. I am not sure why she told me this, Temp, but I am very out of sorts and nervous. What does she mean?"

Temperance waved her words away. "Mama told me the same rubbish, and I urge you to forget her words. Nothing at all scary will happen."

Despite the reassuring words, her sister seemed anxious.

"There is something you are not telling me. What is it?"

Temperance stood silent for several moments, then sighed. "It is just that you are such a ninny hammer sometimes. You are afraid of pain...and blood and—"

Prue shot to her feet staring at her sister in horror, but

stumbled back to sit on the stone bench, fearing her shaking legs would not hold her upright. "It will be *bloody*? My God! What does he plan to do to me?"

"It is not at all dire as you are making it to be," Temperance said, coming over to her. "Pray do not let your imagination run wild."

"Then why the secrecy and grave warnings?" Prue thrust a loose tendril behind her ear. "You are a married lady, Temperance. Please tell me in full what tonight will entail."

Her sister's cheeks colored brightly, and the sight riveted Prue. Her sister was very self-assured and unflappable, yet she blushed and could hardly meet Prue's eyes.

"I have said enough," Temp muttered.

"I daresay you have not! You have left me with more anxieties than mama!" Prue had an accident many years before when she had been a child of six years. She had tumbled from her startled pony. There had been so much blood from a terrible gash along her arm, the pain agonizing. Since then, the mere sight of blood would send her into a swoon, and she found even the slightest pain intolerable.

"Prue—"

"Please, Temperance," she whispered.

"Close your eyes."

"Good God, it cannot be that awful. Every married woman does it, and they are walking around very much alive."

"I merely do not want you to see my face and the infernal blushes!"

Prue actually smiled and ceded, letting her lashes flutter closed.

"Tonight, you must consummate your vows to be really married. If it is not consummated, you are not...you are not married in truth."

Prue bit into her bottom lip. "I see. And what does this consummation involve?"

Temperance cleared her throat. "The earl will come to your

bedchamber, or you go to his. This is after you have taken a bath and brushed your hair out. He will place you on the bed and push the nightgown to your waist.”

Prue’s heart lurched in mortified shock.

“He will join your bodies together.”

“What does that mean? *How?*”

“Upon my word, this is insufferable,” Temperance muttered. “I cannot explain that part in much detail, but when he does it, there will be pain.”

Prue gripped the edges of the stone bench until her knuckles hurt. “And blood?”

“Yes, but not a lot.”

“How long does it last for?”

She braced herself for the answer.

“I...the first time, it was only a few minutes.”

Prue’s eyes flew open. “The first time?”

Her sister seemed like she would eat bugs before continuing this conversation. “It depends on how often your husband...takes you to his bed for marital relations. I promise, Prue, that it becomes very pleasant after that first time, and that is how children are made.”

*Oh!* She did not believe her sister that this marriage relation would eventually become pleasant. Still, Prue did not want the earl to see her as naïve or foolish. She would do her duty, and she would damn well do it satisfactorily. There would be no hysterics on her part. “Thank you for letting me know,” she said, leaning over to hug her sister.

“You are welcome; now promise me you will not faint at the sight of blood.”

Swallowing down the sick feeling rising inside, she said, “Of course I won’t. I am the Countess of Wycliffe, not a child.”

They chatted for a few more minutes before Prue made her way inside and used the stairs to prepare for her husband.

SEVERAL HOURS LATER, Prue accepted that all her preparation was for naught. She had been bathed in rose-scented water, her long dark brown hair with its gold highlights brushed with over a hundred strokes. Her nightgown was also not the usual cotton, but a light blue silky shift that revealed more than it covered. When she had stared at her body in the oval mirror, her dark green eyes had glittered with nerves and anticipation.

Pushing off from the bed where she had been sitting since she heard her husband moving about in his adjoining room, she padded across to the connecting door. Temperance's words had implied Prue might be the one to initiate consummation. Taking a deep breath, she opened the door, stepped over the threshold, and quickly closed it behind her. Her husband swiftly turned from where he stood by the window with a glass in his hand.

Her throat dried, and her belly went frightfully hot. He was naked. Well, at least his shoulders and chest were. She was too frightened to lower her gaze to see if he was naked everywhere.

"What are you doing here?"

Confusion rushed through her. "To consummate our vows," she murmured huskily.

His eyes flared, but he only watched her with that hawk-like stare. What was he thinking? Prue walked over to him, grateful that her legs did not wobble and show her uncertainty. She stood only inches from him, and she inhaled his evocative, masculine scent and felt the heat wafting from his body. She noted that his eyes had darkened, obliterating the golden-brown striations normally at its center. His long fingers curled around a glass of what looked like brandy, and his throat worked on a tight swallow.

She found his reaction curious, and inexplicably her body responded. Prue felt warm all over, and her heart shook beneath her breastbone. Digging deep for courage, she pressed her hands flat against his chest. He inhaled harshly, then only silence lingered in the bedchamber. The merry cackle of the fireplace mocked the perilous tension that coated the air.

"I planned to wait," he said, almost harshly, a tinge of red covering his sharp and very elegant cheekbones.

*You are very handsome, aren't you, husband?*

"Wait?"

"Yes, until...until you are ready."

"I am ready now," she refuted, tentatively sliding her hand up over the hardened wall of muscles.

"Do you even know what bedding entails?"

"Yes."

A soft groan whispered from his lips, and he lowered the drink onto the ledge of the window with a *clink*.

He took a single step toward her, and now their bodies were flush together. She had to tilt her head to see his expression. He was taller...larger, and suddenly she felt surrounded by him. Yet, it was not an unpleasant sensation. Perplexing fluttering went off low in her belly, and her breasts felt suddenly heavy and a bit tender.

He threaded his fingers in the length of her hair and nudged her, so she met his gaze.

"You are just a girl—" he began gruffly as if he struggled with something.

"I am a woman!" Prue inhaled raggedly, for it was most important that he saw her as a woman...his wife! Not as a girl who he believed was still wet behind the ears. "*Your* woman," she said with instinctive provocation.

The fingers in her hair tightened even further, and he spun with her to press her against the wall. Something hard dug into her stomach, and she knew this is what he would use to join them during consummation. A slow, torturous ache rolled through her, and she inhaled sharply.

Prue darted her tongue to wet her dry lips. "I..." her throat closed. What was there to say. "I am ready."

He groaned, bunched her hair into his hand and shifted her head. Oh, God, he was going to kiss her...and then take her to the bed where that impossibly hard thing pressing in her belly will

make her feel pain and bleed. And his eyes, they gleamed with something that seemed almost savage. There was nothing tender in his stare. It was pure...pure...? She didn't know what it was, but it was intoxicating. A roaring began in her head, and her entire body shook with nerves, alarm, and anticipation. To Prue's horror, darkness started to edge her vision.

“Oh, no,” she whispered before succumbing to the darkness into a dead faint.



## Chapter One

*Three years later*

If Lady Prudence Campbell, Countess of Wycliffe, was destined to be no more than a jewel in her husband's house, then she would damn well outshine them all. She'd spent two years in the country, overseeing the renovations and redecoration of his house, and making friends with his sisters—both older than she—until, one by one, despite claiming they were firmly on the shelf, they had gone to London and found suitable matches, having grand adventures of their own. Meanwhile, she had been married to her earl for three years and hadn't even had a proper kiss to show for it or any sort of fun. The chaste peck on the lips he had given her the day of their marriage certainly didn't count. After all her hopes and dreams of drawing his attention, the reality had fallen disappointingly flat.

But rather than languish away in the countryside, Prue had come to Town determined to make a point. Clearly, she couldn't compare with the charms of whichever woman he had fallen in love with. She couldn't compare to a more worldly, experienced woman. Although her figure had filled out more since her marriage, she never did manage to lose the sharpness of her chin. If not for her friends at 48 Berkeley Square, she might have given it all up for lost.

But the ladies at 48 Berkeley Square were not the sort to quit, and neither was Prue. Perhaps she had been young and naïve when

she had married, but the intervening years had taught her something of how to be a wife, how to manage a grand household. The only thing left was to ensconce herself so firmly into her husband's life that he couldn't dislodge her if he tried. Hence the reason she had decided to host her very first London ball.

This evening, she had chosen a dress of vivid color and daring cut in the hopes of drawing the eye—the eye of one man in particular, Oscar George Campbell, the Earl of Wycliffe. That man, unfortunately, had only remained next to her while doing his duty in the receiving line. The moment the room filled with people, he suddenly found inescapable things to do on the other side of the ballroom.

Something was out of sorts with their marriage, and it wasn't only her suspicions that her husband kept a mistress in Town. After all, he hadn't come home to their country estate except for a couple of too short months in the summer after Parliament disbanded. Since she had been in Town for this season, she had done her utmost to attempt to connect with him, to forge a friendship of sorts and find a way to make their marriage more pleasing than this barren landscape.

And yet he spent more time at Parliament or at the club than he did with her. Their conversations were...boring. Frightfully mundane and tedious as they only spoke about generalities and polite chit chatter about the weather and which social event they intended to attend. Tonight, that would change. If acting the jewel had drawn his eye to begin with—well, that and happenstance—then she would do it again.

Except, her husband did not approach her, though she occasionally caught him looking in her direction. The waltz would be called soon. Everyone present would expect them to dance together, as the hosts of the ball. What if he didn't ask her to dance? Prue didn't think her heart could bear the mortification.

Lady Theodosia, one of Prue's dearest friends, and the lady in charge of 48 Berkeley Square, their secret lady's club, laid a hand

on her arm. "You're doing wonderfully."

Her friend's voice was warm, her expression open and encouraging. It was easy to smile for Theo, even if privately Prue didn't believe the encouragement. She admitted, "I'm a touch nervous. I planned for everything, but..."

"You've no reason to fret. Everything will go wonderfully."

"I cannot believe so many people came," she said with a wide smile. "My very first ball is a success. I am so very glad I accepted your dare, Theo, and you owe me fifty pounds which I will be donating to my beloved charity!"

Theo smiled, appearing even more beautiful. "I knew it would be splendid. You *are* the Countess of Wycliffe. It is time the *ton* knows it, and that is best done with a lavish ball."

"It is also time for my lord to know I am his countess," Prue said, trying not to be too obvious in the glance she cast at her husband.

How imperious he looked as he surveyed the throng, and how superbly handsome he appeared. His gaze rested on her a brief moment and then he looked away. There was so much she wanted to say to Theo, but the words would not come.

"Since his entrance, he has not stopped staring at you," Theo said with a light laugh. "*That* is most glorious."

Has he? She wanted to ask, and then she feared she would confess her husband did not kiss or make love with her. Ever. Perhaps this wasn't the best time to air her every fear. Prue had invited every viper who, prior to her marriage, would have cut her to ribbons. She had no reason to believe that their opinion of her had changed simply because she'd married well. If only her sister were here, but Temperance was far too busy with her new baby to attend such a late-night event.

If the earl had done more than look at her with a vague sort of indulgence since their hasty marriage, perhaps Prue would have a baby now, too. A surge of longing pierced her, and Prue pressed a hand over her waist. She and her sister could have shared in the

journey together. It would be something more than feeling like she was on the outskirts of even her own ball.

Perhaps it was a blessing that Theo was a bit distracted this evening. Every second closer to the expected waltz made Prue that much more nauseous. They spoke a bit more, and then to Prue's shock, she noted the Duke of Hartford, a handsome and coldly arrogant man, approaching them with a single-minded concentration.

"Upon my word, someone *very* eligible and a bit wicked this way comes."

Prue listened in shock as Theo confessed the reason; she had recently denied Lady Perdita—a young lady they all liked and admired—further association with 48 Berkeley Square because of this arrogant dolt. And he was also Perdita's brother.

The orchestra of twenty souls leaped to life as the duke approached Theo and asked for her hand in a dance. Theo looked thrilled and a bit intimidated as she allowed him to lead her to the dance floor. That Prue had not expected. Theo ever looking so bowled over by any gentleman.

With her friend's attention completely captured by the arrogant duke, Prue was able to slip away from the chatter and crush of the ballroom and into the cool spring air unobserved.

These gardens, Prue had walked often enough to know them in her sleep. She had set out lanterns for those wishing to tour the hedgerows, a far cry from the gardens in Fairfax Manor, but a small comfort in London, nevertheless. The moment she stepped between them, she felt invisible. Unobserved. Tension she hadn't known she was holding drained away from her shoulders. Here, she didn't have to act as if she and her husband had the perfect marriage. Here, she could acknowledge how close she was to falling to pieces.

But still, it was better to lose her composure away from the lit path. Only one turn away from the main path was an empty alcove, still awaiting the statue she'd commissioned. It was too

small to fit a bench, but big enough to swathe her in shadow and give her the transient comfort of the hedgerows at her back to lean against. She took a deep breath of the scent of verdant green that almost seemed to wash out the acrid London smog. She wished for the stars she'd come to love in the country, and she closed her eyes and imagined she were there.

*But if you were there, Oscar would not be.* She gritted her teeth and tried to remain in the moment.

The clip of footsteps and distant voices made her breathing come shallowly. She held herself perfectly still, waiting for her guests to pass her on the path. Instead, they stopped. Out of sight, but not out of earshot.

"Come now, Wycliffe, you can't go growling at every man in the ballroom," a voice mockingly said.

Prue pressed her hand to her mouth to smother a gasp at her husband's name. She recognized the voice of the man speaking, as well. A close friend of Oscar's, judging by the frequency with which he visited the house: The Marquess of Trent.

"I am not growling," her husband said, in what was most definitely a growl.

Trent, always an affable fellow, laughed warmly. "You're growling at me right now."

Her husband made a strangled sound.

Trent continued, "And this isn't the first time this week. You skewered half the members of Parliament and may have even created some enemies with that bill you're trying to push through."

The crunch of gravel sounded at first as if the men would continue on their way. When the sound continued, Prue realized her husband must be pacing. "That bill is good governance, and you know it. What use is the money lining our pockets if the people under our care are starving?"

"That's not why you've been so testy. And it certainly isn't why you look ready to blacken the eye of any man who looked at your wife tonight."

An unexpected thrill surged through Prue. Her husband had looked possessively at her tonight. She waited breathlessly for him to say something, but he made no reply.

Trent made a sound low in his throat. "Come now, man. It's clear you need to tup a woman. If your pretty wife does not oblige, why don't you take that lovely opera singer? Clarice has had her eyes on you for months, more's the pity."

*Dear God.* Prue tightened the grip on her mouth lest her outrage and pain slip out. How casually it was for men to suggest taking other lovers when they made vows before God and to their wives. Where was their honor?

A heavy sigh sounded. "I am not interested in Clarice."

"You have shown no interest in any woman, and that is your problem. Take a bloody mistress."

"No."

Her husband sounded frustrated, but his tone made her wonder if maybe she had been wrong. If he hadn't taken this opera singer to bed, if he hadn't taken a mistress at all, that meant...he, like she, had been celibate. Prue clasped her hands together to stop them from shaking. *Good heavens.* Had she really misjudged his character and honor? A fierce ache bloomed in her heart. She hated that they hardly knew each other. It was entirely preposterous.

"It is expected. None would judge you for it man."

"I wonder at your need to convince me to take a lover when I am not interested."

Trent made a reply she could not discern. *Thank you*, she said silently to her husband. But for how long would he remain without a lover, with his friends prodding him toward taking a mistress? Prue clutched her lower lip between her teeth, biting hard to keep from moving.

Trent laughed again and said, "Clarice has been looking your way now for months and will take no other protector. A tiger she may be, but trust me, a warm and willing tiger in your bed is far

better than doing battle with a prickly wife.”

Prue balled her fists. She was not prickly! She was nothing but cordial to her husband. Openly friendly, in fact. It was he who kept himself at a distance, not her.

His voice every bit as much a growl as his friend had accused, Oscar said, “I’ll thank you not to think about my wife in or out of bed, Trent. I will not hesitate to knock your teeth loose!”

Her heart leaped at the protective way her husband sounded.

“Oh, give off, man. I’m only trying to help. The more you stomp around, the more enemies you’re going to make and the harder it will be for you to push through your bleeding-heart bills. Take a breath. Have a cheroot. Let’s get back before your wife realizes you’ve absconded with me.”

Prue heard a rustle of clothing, the creak of hinges. A moment later, the bitter smell of cheroot smoke curled into the air.

“Better?” Trent asked. He sounded amused.

Her husband grunted. “You’re right. We ought to get back before the supper waltz is called.”

Prue waited for the footsteps to recede before she stepped out of the alcove. She took several breaths to steady herself, to push down the swirl of emotions still trying to dig their claws into her. Among them, outrage, shock—and hope.

Since her husband hadn’t come to her bed in all these years, she had expected him to have taken a lover, perhaps a woman who meant more to him than she did. In truth, she had even started to believe he must have had great affections for someone else, and his honor had forced him to marry her. Nothing she had heard made her suppositions likely to be the case.

At least not yet.

Perhaps she still had a chance to set her marriage to rights, and without fighting for his love and affection with another woman. That had been her dreaded fear. That Oscar would have no room for her in his heart because all that space was already occupied by another woman, even if he was not in love with that phantom lady.

*How silly I've been.*

Prue smiled, tightly wrapping her arms around herself. Whatever her plan, she couldn't enact it tonight. She had to be above reproach, and to that end, she fiddled with the low neckline of her gown. Once she felt composed, she returned to her job as hostess. Prue stepped into the ballroom the moment the supper waltz was announced.

Her stomach lurched. She should have hidden away in the garden a moment or two longer. As the guests dispersed like ants in search of their partners for the dance, Prue held herself still. She would be mortified beyond reproach if her husband did not dance with her for this waltz as everyone expected. It would lend negative speculation to the state of her marriage. The drafted man was nowhere to be seen. A wall of emotions rose around her. She felt as if she stood in the eye of the storm.

And then he stepped out of the crowd. Oscar, her husband. The man never quite far from her thoughts even when she chided herself for being so naïve and foolish. She may not have a chance of claiming a marriage as loving as that of her parents, but she could still salvage something between them yet.

Especially when she found that he was not angling himself to walk past her but was approaching her. She couldn't remove her gaze from him. He still kept his hair a bit untidy at the front, falling into his eyes as if he tried to shield himself behind it. But now she knew the shape and color of those eyes. Now she felt the touch of them even when they stood a ballroom apart.

He stopped an arm's length away and offered his hand. "I trust you saved this dance for me?"

His voice was rough, but not quite the growl she had heard in the garden. She licked her lips, triumph flushing through her as she found his gaze dropping to her mouth. Prue slid her hand into his, both gloved and yet the touch so hot she could feel it through the silk. She wanted to say something sophisticated, something seductive and alluring.



Instead, all that came out was, "You know I'm yours." *Oh, no, I should have said something else!*

His fingers tightened on hers before he led her out to the dance floor. They found a spot in the center, and although others had taken up their stances around them, Prue couldn't help but feel as though they were in a world of their own. She realized, with a start, this would be their first dance. It made her fingers tremble as she laid them on his arm. The press of his palm on her back made her long to step closer, but they weren't alone. They were in a room full of people, most of whom were watching for any hint of stumble or scandal. Prue clung to her composure by her fingertips as the music started to play. She and Oscar started to move in tandem as if they had danced like this all their marriage. As if they had danced even closer.

As Prue's cheeks burned, mirroring the ache in other parts of her body, she was struck by how much she still wanted her husband.

If he was to take any woman to his bed, she wanted it to be her...and only her.

## Chapter Two

Prue was still thinking about that dance with her husband, about his hands on her back and the fluid movement of their bodies together, long after the last of their guests had left. In fact, long after her maid had prepared her for bed, and she had slipped in between the cool sheets. The door directly across from her bed, the door that had always remained shut since she had been here in London, taunted her. That connecting door led to her husband's bedchamber, where he would be readying himself for bed or perhaps already asleep. The way he'd looked at her tonight had made her want to be brazen. It made her want to open the connecting door.

Before she changed her decision, her bare feet kissed the carpeted floor. The sheets tangled into an unruly pile in her wake. Prue didn't pause to glance at the vanity to check her appearance, but already had her hand on the latch by the time it registered to her that she should be nervous.

She opened the door before she lost her courage, though she didn't release the latch.

Her husband was inside his bedchamber, bathed in candlelight, as his valet readied him for bed. Prue couldn't recall the valet's name—couldn't recall much of him at all, at the moment—seeing as her husband was standing in the middle of the room in a state of undress.

Boots removed along with his stockings to show his bare feet, part of him she'd never seen before and found strangely attractive.

His trousers concealed the shape of his legs, but his jacket was draped over a chair in the corner along with his cravat, waistcoat, and shirt. He stood in the room wearing nothing but his trousers. Prue's hand tightened on the latch, rattling it. She'd forgotten how to breathe.

The valet took an uncertain step away from his master and stammered, "P-perhaps I'll leave you to finish the rest on your own, milord. Countess."

From the periphery of her vision, Prue noticed him give a hasty bow before scampering from the room. The latch clicked shut behind him, leaving the room enveloped in silence except for that of her own rapid heartbeat.

She still couldn't remove her gaze from her husband. His shoulders were as broad as the jackets he wore had implied, fitted with lean muscle down a chest dusted in dark hair. That hair started to form a trail somewhere in the vicinity of his navel, only to be cut short by the fall of his trousers, still buttoned. She stared at those buttons for a good long while but wishes alone did not undo them.

"Why are you here?" Her husband's voice was curt and gruff.

Prue drew in a breath, realizing only then from the spots dancing at the corners of her eyes that she'd still forgotten to breathe. She raised her gaze to his but couldn't read the expression there. His jaw was tight, clenched, as were his hands by his sides. She half expected him to turn away in disgust, but his gaze was riveted on hers. Was he recalling the only other time she had entered his chamber?

Swallowing, she managed to find her voice and after it, a smidge of the confidence she'd felt in crossing her room. "I'm your wife. It is my right to open this door."

A tic started in the corner of his jaw, almost shadowed by a hint of stubble. She wanted to kiss it away but feared removing herself from the threshold.

He found his voice first. "I'll have to ask you to leave, madam."

Prue clenched her hand until the metal of the latch dug into her skin. *Madam?* She was his bloody wife, yet he acted as if she were an aberration. Her face flushed with mortification, or perhaps fury. Even standing in the threshold of his bedroom in her nightgown was not enough for him to invite her into his bed.

Well, in that case, perhaps she simply had to be bolder.

She dropped her death's grip on the latch to the connecting door and marched across the room. He didn't move, though his eyes narrowed. Once in front of him, she steadied herself with her palms on his warm shoulders, the skin like velvet beneath her touch. Then she raised herself onto tiptoe and pressed her mouth to his in the fieriest kiss she could muster. His mouth was as hot as a brand, but that wasn't the reason the kiss lasted mere heartbeats.

He didn't kiss her back. His mouth was hard and unmoving above hers.

Mortification won over fury, and she released him as if scalded. Turning her back, she stormed from the room and shut the door so firmly in her wake it made her ears ring. Her mouth wobbled. She tried not to cry as she buried herself in the blankets of her soft bed.

But the truth now was inescapable. He hadn't kissed her, hadn't consummated their marriage, because he simply didn't want *her*. Should he take a mistress it would shatter her, and Prue might possibly take her rapier and challenge him to an honor duel—for breaking their vows, and the faith she had in love and the possibility of their happiness.

A laugh hiccupped from her. Challenge her husband to a duel indeed. That would probably see him banishing her to the country forever.

*Oh, God, how do I fix this?*

BURNING desire licked through Oscar's body like a living flame and his damn heart felt as if it would burst from his chest. He had

never wanted any woman more than he wanted his wife after that aching chaste kiss. As the connecting door rattled in its frame, his knees weakened, and he sat heavily down on the bed, nearly landing on his sleeping cat. Cleopatra made a disgruntled sound and swished her majestic tail out of the way just in time. Oscar barely heard her.

He was still trapped in that impossibly brief yet perfect kiss.

What in God's name had happened? The lady who had marched over to him, fire spitting in her lovely dark green eyes was not his wife. No, his wife was painfully shy around him, and usually lowered her eyes to her hands, the tablecloth, or sometimes her damnable shoes whenever she spoke with Oscar. She was certainly not the wife who had fainted on their wedding night, confirming he was an ogre of the worst sort.

Prue had touched him with more confidence than she had ever displayed in his presence before. Gone was the shy girl who often stammered in his presence, the one he'd known during trips home to Fairfax Manor. Somehow, when he hadn't been looking, she had matured in body and in mind.

The skin of his shoulders felt impossibly sensitive after the press of her palms and the curl of her fingers. He'd barely felt the edges of her fingernails, but that didn't keep him from imagining the bite of them into his back while he had her in the throes of passion. Her kiss was inexperienced, but oh so achingly eager. It had taken everything in him not to respond and pull her flush against him, to finally feel the press of her hips and breasts and soft belly against him. But, if he'd done that, she would surely have noticed the state of arousal she'd put him in the moment her soft lips crushed his.

Surely he would have mortified her sensibilities and sent her back to that shy, stuttering girl who had served as a reminder he married someone barely out of leading strings. Someone unable to manage his insatiable passions and the primal and ungentlemanly way he could tup sometimes.

Oscar didn't realize that he had been fumbling for the buttons

on his fall until cool air washed his thick, overheated erection. He ran his palm over himself and shuddered at the thought of replaying that kiss a little differently. Gathering her close, stripping her of that flimsy nightgown and pressing her back into the bed—

He released himself as if he'd touched a flame. "What in the blazes am I doing?"

He stormed away from the bed and to the basin of water and splashed himself with it. It was lukewarm, not cool enough to douse his ardor.

Gripping the sides of the basin, he growled, "That lady is going to drive me mad."

Behind him, he heard the soft pad of the Siberian cat hopping from the bed to the floor. A moment later, she twined herself around his legs, purring.

He sighed and reached for a towel to dry his face and chest. "I must wait until she is bloody mature enough to take a lover." And even then, he would have to be very mindful of how he took her to his bed.

Oscar tossed the towel aside, not really caring where it fell, and undressed the rest of the way for bed. Cleopatra followed and when he sat on the edge of the bed, she joined him and rubbed against his nightshirt. He stroked the cat absently. Something heavy and uncomfortable sat inside his chest. Oscar looked at the closed door that connected their chambers. In her eyes just now, he had spied emotions that were not normally present. In truth, she had hardly met his regard over the years for him to assess her feelings to even comment on them. However, he *had* thought her content with the state of their marriage, and comfortable at the state in which their relationship meandered along.

"What more does she want from me? I've been a good husband to her. I talk to her every night over dinner, I take her out to Hyde Park to show everyone that I'm loyal and doting to my wife. I have never taken or thought of another woman since I saw her that first night in the ballroom. I have honored my promises to her and

vowed to wait until she no longer seemed so damned fresh faced and innocent!”

With a sigh, he dropped his head into his hands. Cleopatra butted at them, disgruntled that he’d stopped with his ministrations. He patted her with one hand and tried his damndest to forget that his wife had ever been in here.

“She can’t want love from me. We both know we married for convenience. I saved her from the bloody scandal.”

Cleopatra gave him a condescending look and turned her back, her tail waving through the air.

He grunted. “Yes, I know, and she saved the estate from ruin. It was a fair exchange.”

And because her dowry had helped to take the estate out of the red, to give his sisters respectable dowries and to give him the money he needed for the investment that had started to turn a tidy profit, he had tried to be a good husband. Being a good husband had nothing to do with fooling his wife into thinking he was in love with her. It wasn’t that he didn’t believe in love, he just didn’t think about it, neither to yearn after it nor to bemoan the lack of it in his marriage. More important was to fulfill his duties and responsibilities to his title and to his family. That was what he had been doing these past few years.

Well, that, and trying not to think of how damnably young a wife he’d married. He had not been able to consummate their marriage, not with her so young, her breasts and hips barely formed. Not when on their wedding night, she had stood in the center of his bedroom looking like a little waif and trembling like a leaf. She had been frightened, but had lifted that pointed chin in brave invitation, her lush mouth firming in determination.

Then when she had tentatively touched him and he had allowed his hunger to show, his bride had fainted. Oscar had caught her, then carried her back to her bedchamber, tucked her into the bed, and returned to his own chamber knowing the entire encounter must have been an ordeal for someone so young.

He had taken a young bride who was painfully shy. So, he'd done the honorable thing and waited for her to grow up. Her sweet shyness and the way she avoided looking at him had made it feel like he would wait forever. She only became animated when she laughed and chatted with his sisters. He still recalled that dark feeling which would sweep over him whenever he entered a room, and her smile would dim. He had felt like a monster stealing the sunlight.

Oscar stood and padded over to the connecting door. A peculiar regret twisted in his gut, and he pressed one of his palms against the oak panel. Was she already asleep or had he hurt her just now with his gruff rejection? That was the last thing he wanted to do. Hurt her.

The memory of the unfathomable emotions swirling in her eyes rolled through his thoughts. What had she been thinking when she stormed inside his chamber? His hand dropped to the knob almost as if it had a will of its own, and he gripped the knob, tempted beyond measure to open the door.

And what would he say to her? What would he do?

Her actions tonight rattled him far more than he realized. Was his wife discontented with their marriage? Never before had any protestation about their arrangement fallen from her lovely mouth. With a wry twist of his lips, Oscar admitted her young age, shyness, and delicate sensibilities had prevented him from breaching certain topics with her, such as consummating their marriage, and the matters of having their heir.

Well, the woman who had kissed him tonight had certainly seemed far more mature. "Why?" He muttered aloud. "Why now?"

*Forgive me if I wounded you just now.*

Instead of opening the door, Oscar turned around and went back to his bed.

When he lay back and settled himself in, Cleopatra took her customary spot on the pillow next to his head. By morning, she would be suffocating him, but he didn't mind. It made his bed a



little less lonely. It made the door between the adjoining chambers a little less alluring.

“I should get that thing a bloody lock,” he whispered in the darkness of the room.

How he had managed to hold himself in check tonight, he didn’t know. But he’d made himself a vow when he’d married her. Oscar would not take her to bed until she appeared mature enough. Physically and emotionally. Perhaps when she was two and twenty, an age his sisters had seemed to have matured significantly into the lovely ladies they were today. Once, after firmly pointing out to his mother that he was waiting to fill his home with the patter of little feet, she had caustically mentioned that she had married at sixteen and had given birth to him by the time she was eighteen.

*I will damn well wait!*

If he went back on that promise, what honor would he have left? If he ravished her before she was ready, what the hell would that make him but a man not in control of his needs? He was not a damn rutting animal led by his cock.

Idly, he scratched at Cleopatra’s stomach. “I can wait. As long as she doesn’t do something like that again.” His heart couldn’t take it if she did. Because he bloody well did not like the questions rearing inside of him. Oscar was not a jealous man, but something savage moved through him. Where had his wife learned this new sensual confidence? One did not go from a bloody shy, stuttering virgin who fainted when she saw the lust in his gaze to a spitfire who flung open doors, planted fierce and defiant kisses on their husband’s mouth, and then slammed the door on her magnificent departure.

He shut his eyes, but the only thing he saw was the set of his wife’s mouth, the fire in her eyes as she crossed to him, the stain of color across her cheeks as she pulled away from the kiss. The nightdress she wore was infuriatingly high-necked, so he hadn’t been able to see how far down that color had gone. But he could

imagine...

He threw off the covers before temptation curled its claws into him. He wouldn't sleep tonight. After drawing on his breeches again, he slipped out of his bedchamber and made his way to the private room he always kept locked. He carried the candle with him and used it to light several others around the room when he reached it. For some reason, he had his best strokes of inspiration in the middle of the night, and always had a few candles handy in this private abode. It was the one thing he kept for himself, and only he and Cleopatra were privy to it.

Tonight, each candle illuminated another painting he'd made of his wife, irritating him with the depth of his obsession. He stood, canting his head, and observing the paintings he made of her, each different and capturing her doing different things. Here was one with her sitting on the lawn reading. Another with her lying in her secret gardens that she lovingly tended in the country, a beautiful array of flowers surrounding her. Oscar sucked in a harsh breath when he realized with each painting of his countess, the shape of her body had shifted from a slender beauty to a subtle voluptuous form.

His heart started to stutter inside his chest.

Not yet; she was far from ready for his passionate brand of loving. He should go back to bed and get a good night's rest. He had estate matters to attend. Still, he found himself seated in front of his easel with a fresh canvas and a stick of charcoal to begin marking the lines. He could see her face altogether too clearly. The shape of her eyes, the set of her soft mouth and just the barest hint of one of her dimples. Before he knew it, the image was laid out in front of him, as fresh as it had been when she'd stood in his bedchamber.

He thought of sleeping then, and returning to it with fresh eyes, but instead he reached for his paints to mix just the right shade of pink to splash along the bridge of her pert nose. If he couldn't share his admiration with her, at least he could immortalize it

here, just for himself.

## Chapter Three

Hours after storming her husband's bedchamber, Prue was still mortified. Quite simply and completely mortified as well as uncertain. A state of existence she deplored. Lady Charity Rutherford, one of Prue's dearest friends, pinned her with a gimlet stare.

"Out with it," Charity said, sinking into the chaise longue by the window.

"Out with what?" Prue said distractedly, watching the carriage that had just collected Theodosia from 48 Berkeley Square rattle down the cobbled streets. Theo had gone off with a duke who had kissed her senseless the evening before. Prue hoped Theo would accept Charity's dare and indulge in an affair with the man. Theo's eyes had been quite saddened of late, and the sparkle of excitement she displayed just now had been a rare delight to witness. A delight inspired by the Duke of Hartford.

*Oh, Theo, I hope you find some happiness.* Prue dearly hoped they would also find Lady Perdrie who had ran away. "Do you believe Theo will be well, travelling God knows where, with that arrogant duke for who knows how long? I do hope she acts on your dare and ravishes the man."

Charity's gaze narrowed. "Theo is gone, and our fearless leader is smart and can very well handle the duke. Now, Theo did not see it because she was all atwitter with Lady Perdita being missing and the duke blaming her for it, but I can see the circles under your eyes and hear the strain in your voice, Prue. What happened?"

Prue closed her eyes as emotions tightened her throat. It had

been so very hard facing Oscar this morning over breakfast, pretending the humiliating night before had not happened. Their conversation had once again been polite and proper. The man had not brought up anything about her unexpected actions, and while she had watched him drink his coffee and read the freshly pressed newspaper, Prue had wondered if today he would take this Clarice to be his mistress. She had wanted to slam her hands on the table and demand answers. But that of course would not do. She was his countess. A lady. How she loathed polite and proper when she wanted to show her emotions.

Taking a deep breath, Prue faced Charity and smiled. Her friend had already taken off the hat she wore to protect her fair skin from the sun, unpinned her lovely auburn hair to tumble to her shoulders, and removed her shoes and stockings.

Thinking about how much to share with Charity, Prue took her time removing her shoes and stockings. This was one of the things she loved most about being a part of this secret lady's club. The freedom of just being oneself without any judgement.

The door to the drawing-room opened and Lady Lucinda, a young widow and another great friend barreled inside the room. Miss Harriet Thompson and Lady Agatha Barrett hurried right on Lucinda's heels. Harriet and Agatha wore fencing gear, clearly preparing for a lesson with Monsieur Jean-Phillipe Lambert. They were at least an hour early.

"Are you well, Prue? You seem out of sorts," Agatha said, sitting on a single sofa with a sigh.

"I did not sleep well last night," she admitted with a small smile.

Harriet cast her a probing stare. "You do know you can confide anything with us."

A rush of gratitude filled her, and for the hundredth time Prue wondered how she would have survived her loneliness without these ladies. She sauntered over to the sofa opposite Charity and sat, reclining against the padded cushions.

“What I am about to confess will be shocking.”

The ladies showed great interest at that, always the ones to love gossiping. Prue laughed. “It is not any gossip; it is very personal and what I am about to say must not leave this room.”

“You have our confidence,” Charity said warmly. “Please never doubt it. We are not just friends here, but we are a sisterhood.”

The other three nodded in agreement. Another lump formed in Prue’s throat. “Thank you, ladies. Wycliffe and I...we are not as close as husbands and wives ought to be,” she said, hating that her cheeks burned. “We...we are not intimate, and I so desperately want a normal marriage.”

“Oh, Prue,” Lucinda said, scooting closer to her on the sofa. “We had no notion of it. You must be very unhappy.”

How those sympathetic words pierced her. “I have been unhappy, frustrated, and angry. I have been his wife and countess for three years and...we have never kissed.”

“It cannot be so!” Charity cried. “That man looks at you as if he wants to devour you. It is embarrassing, really.”

Prue flushed. “I have seen him staring at me several times and there is this intensity in his eyes, but he never approaches me. Never opens that connecting door, and I do not know how to breach his wall of reserve.”

Agatha frowned. “Please, Prue, do not hate me for suggesting this. Perhaps he...he has a mistress?”

Everyone winced.

“He does not. I overheard him speaking with Lord Trent who was all but begging my husband to take a mistress. Some opera star name Clarice. Wycliffe refused.”

“That my dear,” Lucinda said, “is most interesting. I am twice widowed. I know something about men. That he does not take a mistress but stares at you with want says that your husband is a normal man with appetites that he might be uncertain in pursuing.”

Prue stared at her, thinking back to their wedding night. “I

fainted on our wedding night.”

“Was it that awful?” Harriet demanded. “I’ve seen a maid and a footman coming from a linen closet and, let me tell you, she looked most pleased.”

“I fainted before he could even kiss me. There was a look in his eyes that said I would have been ravished most thoroughly and like a ninny I swooned. I woke the next morning to find myself in my bed, and my virtue still intact. My husband has never mentioned it.”

“And since then he has never tried to seduce you to his bed?” Charity asked, clearly still disbelieving.

“Yes. I detect no interest on his part. It is very disheartening.” Prue closed her eyes and rubbed at her temple, hoping to still the slight headache she felt forming.

Lucinda canted her head. “Perhaps your earl believes you are afraid of the marriage bed.”

Prue groaned. Her fainting had suggested that indeed.

“He might think he is doing the honorable thing by staying away from you,” Charity said.

Harriet frowned and tapped her chin with a well-manicured finger. “Yes, but all lords need their heir. He cannot stay away forever.”

Lucinda clapped her hands together. “I believe he might be waiting until you are older. That must be it!”

“I am twenty,” Prue said wryly. “He has already waited three years.”

Charity fixed her with a piercing stare. “I thought you were two and twenty?”

With a slight flush Prue admitted, “I tweaked my age slightly so that Theo would not balk at granting me membership to the club.”

The girls looked suitably impressed and Prue bit back a smile.

“Is your lord much older than you are, my dear?” Lucinda asked.

“Twelve years separate us.”

Lucinda pursed her lips. "That is not so bad. That man is terribly handsome and fit, if I may say so. My first husband was three and twenty years my senior. Going forward, keep it in mind that he might believe as it stands you are too young. Rubbish of course."

Prue nodded thoughtfully. "I am going to ask for a meeting where I will ask for answers."

"Oh, no, my dear," Lucinda said. "Not that at all. No talking, only action. You will go to that man and kiss him and..."

"I already tried," she interjected drily. "It was a spectacular failure."

That shut up her friends.

"How so?" Agatha said, leaning forward.

As briefly as possible, Prue recounted last night's fiasco. Lucinda seemed thoughtful, Agatha and Harriet befuddled, and Charity curious.

"I have the solution," Harriet said, her dove gray eyes brightening. "You should seduce your husband in the naughtiest of ways. The ways they claim rakes persuade us ladies to their beds for wicked delights."

"Seduce him?" Prue parroted, her heart dancing a madcap beat. "I already told you about last night. He was not inclined to my advances."

"*Pfft*," Lucinda said. "I cannot tell if it is charming or pitiful that you believed that little peck was seduction."

Prue sent her friend a scowl. "I will not—"

"Prue?"

She glanced at Charity who had stood and fisted a hand at her slim hip. Her hazel eyes brightly flecked with green gleamed. "*I dare* you to seduce your husband, most thoroughly."

*A bloody dare.*

"Women do not seduce..." she began faintly, bemused at the thrill of excitement thrumming in her veins. Seduce Oscar. Where would she even begin? "I know nothing about seduction."



Lucinda stood, hurried from the room without a word, only to return a minute later puffing.

Prue looked at the sheen of sweat on her friend's brow. "What did you do?"

"Ran to the library and back," she said with a grin, holding up a dark leather-bound book. It was rather small, and Prue did not recall seeing it before in the library.

"This is from Theo's special collection," Lucinda said, plopping down on the sofa. "Gather around girls."

Everyone scrambled closer, while Charity poured sherry in four glasses and handed them out.

"So early in the morning?" Harriet demanded with an arched eyebrow.

Charity grinned as she poured herself a glass. "I have the sneaky suspicion if we are to peruse a book from Theo's secret collection we will need strong libation."

Prue took her glass and sipped the sweet but tangy liquor.

"This book," Lucinda said, "will show you many ways to a man's, ummm, heart."

"So, it is about seduction," Agatha said excitedly. "Thank heavens. There is a very stubborn vicar I have been trying to persuade to marry me."

Lucinda blinked. "I do not believe these are the tools to use on a man of God."

Agatha sent her a saucy wink and Lucinda rolled her eyes.

"It will be shocking to your sensibilities, ladies. Prepare yourselves."

Heavens, Agatha and Harriet looked flushed and nervous. Charity's expression was inscrutable. It was a glimpse of something naughty and forbidden. An electrifying thrill coursed through Prue and she leaned forward. "If this book is too naughty for our perusal, I shall look at it in private."

"A perfectly sensible suggestion—" Charity began, her cheeks turning rosy as she opened the book in the middle and peeked

inside.

“You would not dare!” Agatha said, lunging for it. “I am tired of being kept in the dark, and why must only gentlemen be aware of what happens to our bodies. The very cheek of it is astounding. The very suggestion that we might have heart palpitations should we know beforehand what happens between a man and a woman is entirely ridiculous. Is that not setting us up to be taken advantage of by rakes and libertines?”

“I do agree with Agatha,” Harriet said, her eyes gleaming. “Open it, Lucinda.”

She complied, and Prue almost dropped her drink on the carpet. They gasped in unison and every cheek pinkened. But no one turned away from the erotic images illustrated in such vivid details. Prue had never witnessed something so...wonderfully scandalous. Admittedly the images depicted in the book were more carnal than she'd anticipated. Glancing up, she noted the wicked gleam in Charity's eyes.

“Have you ever done any of these things?” Prue asked, striving for a worldly air.

Charity's laugh echoed with naughtiness. “Not as yet.” A wistful smile curved her mouth. “But perhaps *very* soon.”

“Seduction is about knowing how to arouse a man's body,” Lucinda murmured, tracing a finger over one of the images. “Men are extraordinarily carnal creatures who like to be touched, kissed, petted, and stroked over their entire body.”

“Everywhere?” Prue demanded a bit breathlessly.

“Yes.”

“It is important to know that the seduction of someone is not only about pleasures of the flesh. You must also intrigue his thinking. Entice him with laughter and witty anecdotes. Flatter his vanity but with a subtle touch. Create intimacy so that trust can build between you. And when there is that trust and intimacy, the pleasure will be even greater.”

*Trust and intimacy.*

Craving erupted in Prue's chest. *I want that.* Laughter and friendship. Nothing she said to Oscar would be a false flattery, that she could not do. She wanted honesty between them. Love.

Agatha gasped and Prue lowered her eyes to that new page.

*Oh!* A lady was poised on her knees, a gentleman's large phallus in her mouth. The man's expression was that of acute gratification. The lady herself looked pleased...powerful as if in giving him this pleasure she stole a piece of his soul. In another picture, the woman was lowered to her elbows, her buttocks arched into the air with the man kneeled behind her and said phallus seemingly disappearing into her body.

*Dear God.*

Was this why Oscar avoided her bed, because he wanted this? For in all of Prue's wildest imaginings, she had never even conceived of such a notion during bedding.

For a moment, Prue allowed herself to imagine being clasped in her husband's arms. Her fingers threading through his dark, silky hair; her body pressed against his as passionate hands stroked and molded the shapes of her breasts, hips, and that place between her thighs.

Prue stood and walked over to the window, resting her forehead against the cool pane. "Can I really seduce my own husband?"

"You must—" a soft voice said firmly behind her.

"Charity... I..."

"You must Prue. I can tell that you have been discontented. Theo knew it as well, but we wanted to give you space to breathe until you were ready to confide in us. I am daring you, and I will be putting up our dare on the wager board."

Prue's hand fluttered to rest over her heart. What would it be like to be touched and cherished with intimacy? She shifted so she could see her friend and smile. "I accept your dare."

Charity gasped and sent her a delighted grin. "No half measures."

"None," Prue said with a laugh.

They chatted some more and perused the naughty book before Agatha and Harriet went to their fencing lesson. Lucinda went to the card room where a few ladies gambled, and Charity had gone to write her name beside a dare. The one that everyone had been avoiding for it was unspeakably reckless...*to sneak into a man's home and steal love letters back for the lady who had sent them.*

Tucking away the book Lucinda had insisted she borrow, Prue made her way into the large drawing-room below stairs. That was where they met with their fearless leader often, laughed, and came up with outrageous and fun dares and wagers.

She glanced at the dare she knew Charity was undertaking, feeling a curl of concern for her friend. *A pot of one hundred pounds is to be had for the lady who dares to steal back a certain packet of love letters from that wicked libertine Viscount Sallis.* Some of their dares were more reckless than others, and this one was even a bit harebrained. Still, Charity was determined to follow through, and Prue would support her.

Walking over to the wager board, Prue took up the chalk, but she did not write the dare. There was a measure of hesitancy, for everyone would know the intimate details of her marriage, but with a small smile, she pushed it away. She trusted every single member, all five and thirty, at 48 Berkeley Square. For everyone under this roof, it was about the genuineness of their friendship and love, the joy of being themselves without mockery or judgment. They were a sisterhood.

She scribbled,

*Charity has dared Prudence to seduce the Earl of Wycliffe to her bed. Prue has accepted this dare.*

What she did not write on the board was that she would do everything to seduce not only his body but his heart into giving her a passionate love, a husband who was a friend and a lover.

Even if the odds seemed so dismal.

Enticing Oscar's heart might be a difficult task for she had

never forgotten how dismissively he'd claimed a marriage connection had nothing to do with love. Given the distance between them, it was unlikely her husband's viewpoint had changed.

*Still...all or nothing.* She would not simply accept that it was so; Prue would try and hope that he did not shatter her in the process.

## Chapter Four

Prue had not dressed for seduction tonight when she'd come to dinner. If what she wanted out of this marriage was a friendship, not only a lover, then she had to stop contorting herself into what she thought the earl wanted her to be. To that end, she had donned her favorite dress of soft burgundy muslin with sprigged roses, too dark to be fashionable among the *ton*. But it hugged her body like a caress and fortified her for the undertaking she had decided to make. One way or another, she was going to woo her husband.

As the footman cleared away the dishes from their evening repast, Prue leaned forward and caught Oscar by his sleeve. He always had an eye for fashion, and the deep green of his jacket tonight brought out his brown eyes and black hair. His muscles tensed beneath her touch. Though she wanted to slip her hand beneath the cuff of the jacket to touch his bare skin, to test whether his heartbeat was as fast as hers, she held herself still.

When he opened his mouth, she spoke first, to forestall the customary *goodnight* that ended each of their dinners together.

"Play with me."

His lips parted as his jaw clenched, a contradiction in body language that she couldn't reconcile. Despite the heat climbing into her cheeks, she held his unreadable gaze.

She cleared her throat and amended, "Chess, I mean." Blast, but she was making a mess of this. Tightening her hand on his sleeve to keep him from leaving, she collected herself and tried again.

*Be bold. Be confident.*

“Would you like to adjourn to the library for a game of chess?”

That sounded far more like a poised countess than the garble of words she’d managed to get out the first time. But no, she wouldn’t chide herself for slips of the tongue. She would freely be herself instead of thinking she had to be countess-like always.

Yet it made her feel exposed.

With a slow, gentle tug, he pulled his arm away from her. Her stomach dropped with the certainty that he would refuse. Instead, he leaned back in his chair and assessed her with a contemplative expression. “I didn’t know you played.”

Chess. Fortunately, she had learned, and even if her skills were never enough to best Charity, she wasn’t an appalling player. Prue lifted her chin and fought not to fidget. “I do. A dear friend taught it to me.”

“And do I know this friend?”

Prue was decidedly curious about that dangerous throb in his tone. Did her husband by chance believe this to be a male friend? Biting back her smile, she replied, “Lady Charity Rutherford.”

“I see. I have heard her brother mention she is a most excellent player. I have a chessboard my father gifted to me on my 12<sup>th</sup> birthday. I am sorry I did not know of your aptitude earlier. It has been growing tedious to play myself.”

Prue smiled slightly. “We barely know anything about each other. Don’t you think that ought to change?”

When he didn’t rebuff her outright, Prue grew bolder. She leaned forward, earnestly holding his gaze. “We barely speak. I’d like to remedy that.”

Her words seemed to puncture the strain between them. He laughed, a low sound that might have warmed her if it hadn’t infuriated her. “That’s outrageous, my dear. We speak all the time.”

He scraped his chair back and stood, fixing the fall of his jacket.

Prue stood as well, but she was far less formal about it. She rolled her eyes and turned away from him. “Oh, yes. We speak all

the time—about the weather, or the newest style of carriage, or the dinner menu, or the delicate seating arrangements for the guests for your political dinner parties. Nothing of substance. You cannot know me like that.”

She crossed the length of the long table and all the way to the door before she realized that he wasn’t following. On the threshold to the corridor, she chanced a glance behind, only to find that he hadn’t moved from his spot at the head of the table. Over his shoulder, the visage of another earl, his grandfather, leered down a long nose that looked very like Oscar’s. But there, the resemblance ended. For as cold as the old earl and the painting was, Prue had to believe that there was more warmth in her husband. If she didn’t, Prue didn’t know how she would survive this marriage and the challenge she had taken up.

She raised her eyebrows in challenge. “So, to the library?”

That seemed to shake him free of whatever reverie had gripped him. He crossed toward her with long steps and indicated the door at her back. “Lead the way, my lady.”

Although she never lingered in the room, she knew the way to the library by rote. It was where Oscar had set up his desk, where he preferred to pour over matters of his estate, and correspondence, and the other businesses he occupied himself with rather than spend time with her. She’d chosen to enter his domain deliberately, because if she was to shake free from the cage her marriage had imposed upon their life, best to start here.

The moment he stepped in after her, leaving the door ajar, he offered her a libation. “I’m not certain I have sherry, but I can ring for a footman.”

She shook her head. “Don’t bother. I’ll have what you’re having.”

He gave her an incredulous look. “I drink whisky.”

“Two fingers, please.” She held his gaze with a smile that felt all teeth. With a curl of his lips that looked uncomfortably like amusement, he inclined his head and turned to the mantle to fill a



pair of tumblers from a waiting decanter.

Prue made herself comfortable. She toed off her slippers as she pulled the pins from her hair one by one. Normally, she stuffed these into her reticule, but she didn't carry it at home. Instead, she left the pins in a pile on the corner of his desk. As she shook out her hair, the golden-brown strands falling nearly to her waist, Oscar made a choking sound. She raised one foot onto the chair and peered over her shoulder as he coughed and set the tumblers down on the mantle. Since he didn't seem likely to choke to death, she continued to reach up beneath her skirts and pry off her stocking. Prue rolled it down and off her foot, a swift motion rather than a seductive one. She always felt much better barefoot.

He was studying her now as though she was a curiosity. "Madam, what *are* you doing?"

"Getting comfortable. Feel free to do the same. I won't faint at the sight of your neck if you'd like to remove your cravat."

She'd seen much more of him bare in his bedchamber, after all. Ignoring the way her stomach tightened, she hastily removed her other stocking and shoved the wadded fabric into her shoes. Feigning a nonchalance she didn't feel with his gaze burning into her, she found the chessboard and carried it to the lush carpet in front of the mantle. She set it on the rug and arranged herself to one side while she sorted out the pieces. From the corner of her eye, she could see her husband's Hessian boots, polished and unmoving. My, she must have shocked him half to death. This time, the tightening of her belly was equal parts anticipation and nervousness.

He cleared his throat. "There is a perfectly good desk and chairs."

She laughed and tipped her head back to look up at him. He'd reclaimed the glasses of whisky and no longer looked likely to choke on his own tongue, but he regarded her with the oddest expression.

Prue braced her elbows on the carpet, resting her chin on her

open palm. "I think it's best going forward that you learn who I really am."

Her husband ran his tongue over his lower lip. He didn't look away. Instead, he handed her the glass of whisky and lowered himself onto the rug opposite her. "I must admit, I'm intrigued."

His response fizzled through her like champagne bubbles.

"I like the idea of intriguing you." Her voice was throatier than usual. She swallowed down a sip of whisky to calm her nerves. She savored the taste before letting it slide down her throat. When she set down the glass within reach, she found him looking at her with that odd expression again.

"Who are you, Prue?"

Clearly, he was seeing a side of her he had never imagined. With luck, it would be a side of her he found compelling. With as provocative a smile as she could manage, she tossed her head and answered cheekily, "I'm your wife."

She finished arranging the chess pieces on the board, giving him the honor of playing white. To his credit, he didn't insist they turn the board, but moved one of his pawns two spaces.

Prue assessed the move, trying to anticipate his possible strategies. Never having played with him before, she was all but playing blind. It was thrilling. She freed her knight from the back row but left her finger on the horse's head while deciding whether to commit to the move. When she lifted her finger, he moved another pawn. So it went as they set up their initial plays. A few more swallows of whisky and her confidence came naturally. As she took one of his pawns with her knight, she said in a casual voice, "If I win this match, I'll expect a boon."

He chuckled. "I must admit, I never played chess in quite that way before."

She looked up at him from beneath her eyelashes. "You've never made a wager on a game?"

The smile that stretched his lips was almost boyish. At her invitation, he had unknotted the cravat from his throat and the

starched cloth now hung to either side of his neck. He still wore his jacket, however, more's the pity. "Never with chess. I'm curious, what boon would you ask?" He lifted the tumbler to his lips.

She met his gaze boldly. Without a hint of flirtation, she told him, "If I win, I'll expect you to give me a proper kiss. Proper enough for my toes to curl."

He choked on his sip of whisky. The color tinging his cheeks might have been due to the whisky going down the wrong way, or perhaps she'd managed to scandalize him. She was, however, utterly serious. As he set his whisky glass next to hers, where it wouldn't be tipped over accidentally, she chose to prove herself. On impulse, she leaned forward and licked away a drop of whisky on his lower lip. The flesh was soft, but she didn't linger. As she pulled back, he seemed frozen in place.

A wide smile tantalized on her mouth, but she feigned sincerity as she teased, "Oh, dear. You look as though you cannot breathe, husband. Should I call for a physician?"

He scowled and bit off two words. "No need."

Turning his attention back to the chessboard, he made a more aggressive move and didn't mention her proposed wager. Nor did he ask for something in return. But she had only to look at the fall of his breeches to see that she had had some effect on him. Pretend otherwise as he might, her husband wanted her.

Inwardly she crowed in triumph while moving another piece. His strategy was brilliant, and she pondered on a play for several minutes before making a move.

"Who taught you, Oscar?"

She was silently startled at how sensual his name sounded as it fell from her mouth.

"My father. I was a lad of six years when I snuck into his study and climbed under his desk while he worked. My nursemaid went in there, and she asked the earl if he had seen me, for she had looked everywhere."

"Why were you hiding?"

"I wanted to avoid bath time."

Prue smiled. "Were you naked?"

"Distressingly so."

She laughed. "I cannot imagine it. You seem so frightfully proper now."

"Ah, I can be a right devil. I'm afraid it started then."

Prue made a decisive move that had him canting his head to study the board for an intense moment. "Smart," he praised. "Very smart."

His warm praise filled her belly with a thousand butterflies.

He made his move and, to Prue's delight, continued with the story. "I pinched my father on the leg, and he looked down and saw me. He had been so engrossed in his ledgers he was surprised to see me there. He played along with my mischief. Denied seeing me and wondered what mischief his naked son might be up to. I think the nursemaid caught on, for she stopped searching for me."

"And you spent the time in his office learning to play chess naked?" she demanded incredulously.

"My father was a man of immeasurable patience, and he saw the humor in life and his son's antics."

"He sounds like a man to be admired."

"Yes, and I wish you could have met him."

"I would have liked meeting him. Thank you for sharing the memory."

They shared a smile, and Prue almost wept. This simple conversation felt beautiful. In the end, she lost the match. As Oscar used a bishop to place her into checkmate, she couldn't help but feel disappointed. She covered it by standing, leaving her empty glass on the floor next to the chessboard. "Thank you for the game and the lovely conversation. Perhaps we can do it again sometime."

He nodded, far less tense than he'd been at the beginning of their match. He'd even doffed his jacket partway through. She could imagine many more nights like this one, spent talking and

teasing and playing chess.

“You play well. You almost had me,” he said, the glint in his eyes one of admiration.

Although she’d placed him in check twice, Prue didn’t believe him. He was more practiced at the game than she was, but at least he hadn’t seemed to be holding back on her account.

“Thank you. So do you.” She gave him a cheeky smile and turned to collect her belongings. He retrieved the glasses and began tidying up, never mind that they employed a veritable army of people to see that everything was in its place.

At the door, she paused to say, “I have something to confess.”

She caught him bending over the chessboard, gathering up the fallen pieces. Warily, he straightened. “And what might that be?”

Brazenly, she said, “I think you should know that I am wooing you.”

He made another odd sound low in his throat before he smoothed his expression into an inscrutable mask. She was coming to adore surprising him. Her earl had always seemed so chillingly civil and unflappable.

“What are you talking about? We are already married.”

Prue gave him an innocent smile. “You’re a smart man. I’m certain you’ll figure it out.” She was going to leave it at that, but the jealous side of her took hold of her tongue. “You aren’t allowed to take a mistress.”

He stiffened and his gaze narrowed thoughtfully, either at her audacity in making demands of him, or at the change in her. Mere weeks ago, when she’d been very much afraid that he already had a mistress, she would never have dared make the demand, fearing that he would tell her exactly how low she stood on his list of priorities. But knowing that he’d been celibate made her more confident. That, the casual evening, and perhaps the whisky.

When he found his tongue, her husband said, “Then the same must be said for you. You can take no lovers.”

She arched an eyebrow. “I am not the type to dishonor vows

made before God and my husband.”

He held her gaze with steel in his expression. “Neither am I.”

She believed him. Most men of the *ton* would have scores of mistresses, whoever pleased them at the moment. They were powerful men with powerful desires. But something tentative had formed between her and Oscar tonight. So yes, she believed him.

But in that conviction, she lost her glib tongue. “Good.” Before she embarrassed herself, she turned to leave. “Goodnight, my lord.”

“Wait.”

He crossed to her with quick strides and took her by the elbow. His bare skin on hers lit her on fire. Would he give her that kiss, after all? She turned her face up to his and whispered, breathy with anticipation. “Yes?”

He cleared his throat and dropped his hand. “I have neglected you.”

Shock jolted through her. “I...” What could she say?

“I held the belief that you were not comfortable in my presence, and I made little to no effort to seek you out. For that, I am regretful. Please accept my apologies, my lady.”

Prue nodded, too at a loss for words.

“I’ve also been an intolerably boring conversationalist. I shall rectify the matter.”

“I shall anticipate it.”

A small smile touched his mouth, and there was a look in his eyes she could not decipher. But how she wanted to know what he thought.

“Would you like to see a play with me tomorrow evening? I believe there’s one playing at Vauxhall.”

Prue couldn’t stop the effervescent glee that bubbled up inside of her. “Vauxhall? Truly? Yes! Yes, of course.”

She’d never been to Vauxhall Gardens before, despite her family living in London. Impulsively, she leaned forward and hugged Oscar, hearing the thump of his heart against her ear as

she pressed herself to his chest. She pulled back every bit as quickly, excitement still coursing through her. “Yes,” she said again. “Thank you.”

He looked at her in a strangely tender way. “My pleasure, countess.”

As she walked barefoot through the townhouse in search of her bed, Prue couldn’t help smiling. Perhaps she just might be able to win it all.

## Chapter Five

Several days danced by lazily, with Prue anticipating Oscar taking her to the pleasure gardens. In that time, she studied erotic literature, inuring herself against her own blushes at seeing the bawdy and provocative images. Prue also extended her reading to a few other books that were more sensual than explicit, trying to understand the lure of being bedded. She had also met with Lucinda alone a few times, who had willingly told Prue about what matters can be like between a man and a woman.

*“It can be a very pleasant experience. As you seduce your husband, you will also find your senses enticed. A double-edged sword... seduction. But that is what we want in your arrangement.”*

*“The art of kissing can be as carnal as the coupling act.”*

*“Take the time and build a rapport with your husband. If he is reluctant, lead the conversation. Flatter his vanity if needs be. The gentlemanly honor inside him will compel him to respond.”*

Those had been samples of the advice from her widowed friend. Prue had tried to put it into practice but received little opportunity to set anything into motion. Oscar appeared exceedingly busy with his political dinners and meetings at his club. The last time they had dinner together was over a week ago, where their conversation had been pleasant but hardly rousing. Once again, they played chess, and she had won after an intense match to Prue's delight. They had parted ways again with the same courtesies, and she had retired to her chamber, staring at the connecting door for endless minutes before clambering onto her bed.



Prue had been making the rounds on the social scene with her friends from the club at the new Earl of Sherburn's introductory ball. Theo had returned to town with an announcement that had set 48 Berkeley Square all atwitter. She had wed the Duke of Hartford by special license. The news that there was finally a Duchess of Hartford had swept through the *ton* like a wildfire causing rife speculation in the scandal sheets. Everyone wanted to know how and why the duke had not married Lady Edith, who society had picked to be his duchess.

Prue scoffed at their pretensions. Thankfully society did not know the nature of Theo and the duke's meeting or how they had come to fall in love. Or surely, a scandal would have lingered for days...months. Lady Perdie had also returned, appropriately apologetic to her family and friends for having run away. The ladies at the club were simply glad that society seemed unaware of it, thus avoiding a scandal, and Perdie was none the worse after her reckless adventure.

Thankfully their wonderful presence helped with the aching loneliness that seemed to have grown despite Prue's plans. It felt exceptionally difficult to get her husband alone. Had he forgotten his promise to visit the pleasure gardens with her?

A pale lilac dress swished into her viewpoint, and Prue smiled to see the owner of that sensual walk was Miss Frederica Williams, one of their most recent members at 48 Berkeley Square. Her guardian was the devilishly handsome Percy Deveraux, Marquess of Wolverton, with a reputation for breaking ladies' hearts by refusing to marry despite being so eligible. Predictably the man was in attendance and scowling down into a glass.

"What have you done to your poor guardian?" Prue said with a laugh as Frederica came up beside her.

"He forbade me from cutting my hair again," she said with a grin that deepened the dimples in her cheeks. Her blue eyes glittering with too much ire, Frederica continued, "I removed a few more inches. I need to find another way to vex him, or I'll soon go

bald.”

It was then Prue noted the short pixie cut that normally framed Frederica’s face was shorter and curlier. Prue chuckled. “He might ship you off to the country soon if you continue vexing him.”

“Better than marrying as he is telling me I *must* do. The odious man!” She cast her guardian a glare which he saw, for he returned a black scowl. The girl then winked, and he narrowed his gaze lifting his glass to her.

Now, what did that mean? Prue suspected some gauntlet had been thrown down.

“Is that the new Earl of Sherburn?” Frederica asked with a soft gasp, ignoring her guardian. “Dear me, the man is staring at Perdie in the most scandalous fashion!”

With a frown, Prue followed Frederica’s gaze and stilled. She was right. The earl looked at Perdie with naked longing. Prue took a sip from her champagne glass, arching a brow at the very *caught* look on Perdie’s face.

“They know each other,” Prue murmured. How curious, only yesterday at the club, they had spoken of the new earl and even set a wager around his name. Perdie had not seemed like she knew the man. When had they met? The earl was very new in town. Unless Perdie had met the man in the time she ran away?

“Oh my, I think Perdie might win the wager without trying,” Frederica said.

Before Prue could answer, her husband snagged her attention. Her heart clamoring, she stood still as he approached, his steps languid and graceful. How handsome he appeared in his black trousers and jacket, accented by a dark silver waistcoat. His jacket fitted his broad shoulders so perfectly, and not for the first time she wondered what activity her husband did to keep so fit.

“My lord,” Prue said, smiling up at him. Her fingers twitched with the urge to brush back the lock of hair curling on his forehead. “I was not aware you were in attendance.”

“I had it on good authority you would be here.”

*So I am here*, lingered but remained unsaid.

“Will you honor me with this dance, countess?” he asked just as the waltz was announced.

Her heart shook. *Our second dance*. She allowed her husband to sweep her onto the dancefloor, seeing that the Earl of Sherburn also led Perdie to the floor. Their shared expression spoke volumes. *Oh, dear*. They did indeed know each other, and it seemed to be an intimate acquaintance.

“You are ravishing tonight, countess.”

Prue smiled up at him. “Thank you.”

“I have been busy of late,” he said, fitting their bodies too close as he spun her in the elegant dance. “I am working on a motion with a small group of lords, and it is taking more time than anticipated.”

Prue made no reply, but inside she smiled. He had never offered an explanation for his absence in her life before. This spoke of an awareness to his duty to her as his countess.

“Are you free tomorrow evening?”

Her only plans had been to call at 48 Berkeley Square. “I can be free,” she said, planning to only stay a couple of hours at the club.

“Good. Tomorrow we will visit the pleasure gardens.”

Her heart thrilled. “You remembered.”

His eyes darkened. “I would not have forgotten.”

She arched a teasing brow. “The invitation was made thirteen days ago. I have been languishing in hope.”

“I have been remiss, wife. I shall make amends.”

She delicately sniffed at his dry, almost amused response. “I am curious as to how you will do so.”

“I will think of something.”

“Perhaps we should set a wager,” she said with candor.

“A gentleman should not wager with a lady, especially his wife.”

“Oh, you poor man. The fun you’ll miss in this lifetime.”

Her husband surprised her by chuckling and pulling her even

closer to his body. With a gasp, she glanced around to see who observed, but everyone was too busy watching the new earl dancing with Perdie.

"I will grant you a boon," Oscar said with a slight smile. "Will that acquit me?"

"A boon?"

"Yes, I recalled at our first chess match you were keen on collecting one."

A kiss. That was what she had wanted. "Accepted," she said softly.

One of his elegant brows winged upward. "So, what is it?"

"I'll take it when I am ready."

"How suitably mysterious," he drawled, his eyes questioning as they roamed over her features.

Prue offered no reply but merely smiled up at her lord in response. Tomorrow at the pleasure gardens, she'd find a way to claim her boon.

HIS COUNTESS'S smile was the prettiest and most captivating Oscar ever had the pleasure to see. Not even the famed lamp lights of Vauxhall which had come on, turning the gardens into a fairyland of blue, yellow, and purple lights shone brighter than his wife. Her lovely eyes, which were set under delicately arched brows, gleamed with rich delight, and her generous mouth seemed specially made for smiling...and kissing. Bloody hell, he desperately wanted to kiss her, just to see if she tasted as warm and sweet as he recalled. Gritting his teeth until his jaw ached, Oscar looked away from his very tempting wife.

It was difficult to admit to himself that he could not stop staring at her or how much he enjoyed the closeness of her presence. They strolled along the dark walk of the pleasure gardens, her arm looped intimately around his, her body at times

brushing against his and provoking too many desires. His wife looked delectable, so beautiful in a dark golden dress with a flattering and revealing décolletage, she looked nothing like the young girl he had married. He could not imagine a woman he would find more desirable than his wife. The tiny, delicate lace fichu around her neck was so flimsy it did not hide her luscious charms, merely tempted him to examine them more. So sophisticated and poised his wife seemed, so unlike the innocent waif he had stood next to as his bride.

How had he not noticed she had blossomed into this sensual woman. And wasn't that the problem? He had been busy not looking lest he was tempted to act foolishly. His wife's gown hugged to a figure that was lush and sensual. Yet it was not only the attraction of her bodily charms which seduced his senses but the way she laughed and basked in the entertainments around her. The very scent of her perfume fired his blood; he wanted to move closer and drink deep of that glorious mouth, which seemed to be begging for his attention.

"Oh, my," she said with a delighted laugh as fireworks exploded skyward.

In the distance near the bridge, the observing crowd sent up a raucous cheer as more fireworks painted the night sky.

"I love it here," his wife said, quickly glancing up at him.

"Some years ago, I read *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker* by Tobias Smollett. The book painted a picture of the pleasure gardens as a lush oasis with the multi-colored lamps shaped like constellations, stars, and suns." Looking about, she continued, "The letters did not do justice to the gardens or the pavilions and lawns, temples and cascades. One of the reasons I longed to visit London was for the pleasure gardens and the museums. I have not really experienced the city yet. However, I am even more determined to do so now."

A swift feeling of shame kicked him in the gut. Such simple outings, yet his wife had never partaken in any of them. As a

husband, he had not sought to learn her likes and dislikes or even attempted to fulfill any wishes she might own. He had a lot to make up for, and he was damned glad she had taken the first step in forging a deeper connection between them. His young wife was mature enough to bridge the distance in their marriage. And what had he been doing? Concentrating on his work by burying his head in his ledgers attempting to fix the affairs of his estates across England and writing speeches for his party in parliament. As if his marriage was not important.

*It is important too.* It always had been, and he should have realized it sooner. The thought slammed into him, faltering his steps. He'd always held that marriage was a simple union with clearly defined roles and did not need to suffer any misunderstandings or messy complications. It did not need overwrought emotions, ideas, and notions about love—in his estimation, nonsensical emotion made people act in haste and recklessness. Nor did a marriage need outside affairs tainting its logical foundation. Marriage was merely a practical arrangement to secure political connections and a respectable bloodline for future generations, but it should still be faithful and honest. Those were his beliefs. Yet looking at the delight on his countess's face and noting the odd way his heart skipped when she smiled, Oscar admitted there might be more to it than just pragmatism.

*But what?*

## Chapter Six

**B**rushing aside that whimsical question, Oscar guided Prue out of the path of three running children.

“How many lamps do you think are here? I cannot conceive that there could be so many.”

“I read once it was over twenty thousand.”

“Astonishing! It is also ingenious of the designer to use such beautifully colored lamps. It creates a magical feel to the air.” She cast him a sideways glance. “Do you come here often, Oscar?”

“No,” he replied, “The last time was years ago with my family.”

“What made you decide to visit here tonight?”

He hesitated slightly. “A good friend, Lord Trent, mentioned attending, and I thought you would like the entertainments.”

“I am really glad you invited me.” She lifted her face to the sky, inhaling the cool night air. “What do you admire most about the pleasure gardens?”

“The cascade. An artificial waterfall that is grand and lovely. There will be a showing in the next fifteen minutes. Let’s see it together.”

His countess expressed her joy by stretching up on her toes to press a very brief peck against his jawline. So boldly improper. Yet for Oscar, the pleasure that rocked through him at that small touch of her mouth to his skin was profound. He swallowed, unable to utter a single word for precious seconds. He felt like a damn fool. How could such a simple caress render him damn near insensible?

A look at his wife showed the curve of a mysterious smile about

her mouth. The shadows and the light from the garden lamps touched upon her skin almost lovingly. The lace at her throat parted, and the hollow of her neck filled with soft, inviting shadows. The arch of delicate throat moved ever so slightly as she swallowed, and the sudden urge to run his mouth along there, tease his tongue over her rapid pulse surged through him. He was so damn tempted to lean down and lick right at that spot.

Walking arm in arm, it took several minutes for them to reach the cascade. The crowd there was eager, the anticipation rife in the air. A bell sounded, and a few minutes later, the show started. A dark curtain was drawn up, showing a natural view of a bridge, a watermill, and the cascade. His wife jolted, gripping his arm when the thundering sound of a waterfall filled the air. Awe settled on her face when the sheets of tins and special effects lighting created a most extravagant display that looked like a gushing waterfall set in the backdrop of lush vegetation and landscape. At the same time, coaches, soldiers, and other figures were exhibited crossing the bridge.

“It is striking!”

“It is considered one of the most original exhibitions of the gardens.”

The show lasted for ten minutes, and his countess’s attention did not move from it once. They spent the next two hours strolling along the various walks and observing the entertainments. A soft rumble came from his wife’s stomach, and she slapped a hand over her mouth.

“I am mortified,” she said. However, she was laughing.

“I’ve neglected to feed you.”

She nodded sheepishly. “I am famished.”

Oscar led her to an elegant supper box, and attendants quickly laid out a repast of finely sliced ham, cold meats, salads, tarts, and dainties that pleased his wife. He watched, amused, as his countess ate several servings before she leaned back in her chair with a satisfied sigh. “I have really enjoyed this night, Oscar. Thank you



for bringing me.”

That odd feeling of shame burned through him once again. *Hell.*

“I have been busy with matters of parliament and the estates,” he murmured, taking a sip of port. “I fear I have neglected you. I would like to take you to see the opera and perhaps you might enjoy a boat ride along the Thames before the season ends.”

“I am sure I would enjoy that with you, my lord,” she said with the sweetest of smiles.

“I admit I’ve thought a few times about inviting you up from the country estate to join me in town. Then I would recall how painfully shy you are and decided to give you some more time.”

She straightened her spine. “Shy?”

“I gather I read that wrong as well.”

“You most certainly did, my lord!”

Oscar settled against his chair in a relaxed pose. “Then why did you avoid meeting my eyes whenever we spoke? You would always blush and would hurry from my presence as if I were the devil incarnate. I am intrigued by this new side of you, and I wonder at the change.”

His countess’s eyes widened, and her cheeks became pink. “I avoided looking at you directly, for I feared you would see the truth in my eyes.”

“And what truth is that?”

She looked away briefly, white teeth sinking into a plump bottom lip. When their gazes met, there was a decidedly nervous look in those lovely eyes. His wife lifted her chin. “I did not want you to see that I was uncertain...about *everything*. We did not court or have any tender moments before marrying. I fainted on our wedding night, and whenever I saw you, my lord, you were so frigidly polite. Though I longed to be brave and unruffled and confident, I knew that you would see my nerves and uncertainty once you looked at me. I did not want you to regret choosing me as your countess. I did not want you to see that I find you terribly handsome and wanted your...your kisses. I was afraid for you to

see all that in my eyes, and I was just as petrified to see the indifference in yours.”

Every nerve he had went taut at that soft confession. “I was never indifferent to you. If you saw my eyes, Prue, your sensibilities would have been ruffled, for you would surely have glimpsed the need I battled to....”

An unreadable emotion touched her gaze for a fleeting moment. “To what?”

He raked his fingers through his hair, leaving it hopelessly disheveled. Oscar had not thought their conversation would have taken this turn. “To take you to my bed.”

Her cheeks burned a brighter red, but his wife did not look away from him but allowed her lips to curve once again into that beautiful, mysterious smile.

“Ah, consummation at last?” that bit was said with amused mockery.

“That is not what I said, countess.”

He was aware of her watching him, studying his expression and body posture. Humor lit up her eyes with a rare beauty.

“Afraid of bedding me, Oscar? I assure you I’ll not faint again.”

That sultry promise slid wickedly against his senses, stirring something raw and possessive inside Oscar. “Why did you change?” he demanded abruptly.

“Growth and self-awareness are simply a part of life,” she said pertly.

Oscar sensed there was more to it, but he would not press her. There would be ample time to unravel this lovely creature before him.

*I’ll not faint again.*

“I believe—”

Her words died, and an inscrutable expression settled on a face that had been enchanted all evening. With a frown, Oscar glanced up and stiffened. Lord Trent and the opera singer trying to position herself into Oscar’s bed strolled gaily towards them. Clarice’s eyes

were avidly skipping over his wife before her lips flattened and her eyes narrowed.

*Blast Trent to hell.* How dare he approach the supper box and his wife with that woman on his arm!

Oscar lowered his napkin and stood.

“Lord Wycliffe,” Clarice greeted, releasing Trent’s arm and dipping into a deep curtsy. Surely one designed to tug his gaze to her revealing décolletage, but he was not in the least tempted.

“Lady Wycliffe,” Trent said, bowing. “I had not expected to see you here. It is a pleasure.”

“Lord Trent,” his countess murmured, dipping her head gracefully. Then she pinned her stare on the woman who had yet to take her devouring gaze from Oscar.

“Oh dear, how unexpected!” Clarice giggled. “Never say you are married?”

Her very tone implied some intimacy between her and Oscar which made her doubt he had a wife. Anger burned through Oscar, and he sent a furious glare to Trent, who had the grace to appear apologetic.

“Miss Wilson—” he began politely.

“Dearest Oscar, will you not introduce me to your darling wife?” Clarice interjected, directing a spiteful stare at his countess, who sipped her champagne with apparently unruffled serenity.

“No, I will not, Miss Wilson,” he said with unapologetic incivility. “Nor are we on familiar terms for you to refer to me by my given name. Do not let it happen again.”

Clarice flushed a violent red, and Trent grimaced. They did not linger but hurried to another box to greet their cronies. When Oscar looked back at his wife, she was drinking another glass of champagne and peering at him over the rim of the glass. Her expression was decidedly bland.

“Forgive the unpleasant intrusion,” he said.

She lowered the empty glass to the table. “It was no fault of your own,” Prue said graciously. “I would like to retire for the

night.”

Oscar regretted that the light in her eyes had dimmed, and now her expression was inscrutable. He held out his arm, and she stood, taking it. An enticing waft of honeysuckles teased his senses. Had his wife always smelled this wonderful? They strolled in silence for several minutes, and for the first time since Eton, he struggled to find words.

“I have never dishonored our vows.”

Her steps faltered, and her fingers dug into his arm. “Thank you, Oscar,” she said softly.

Instead of the knot around his chest loosening, it tightened even further. He felt like a damn bounder. It was evident she had thought him an unfaithful cad for all the years he had ignored her. It also gutted him she would believe him to be a man of such rank dishonor that he would betray vows made before God and his wife.

*I cannot blame my wife for not knowing me.*

And at that moment, he wished their marriage would never revert to the polite and frequently cold civility of the past. Oscar couldn’t bear the thought after experiencing the warmth of her smile, the beauty of her sparkling eyes, or the pleasure of her laugh.

Several minutes later, he assisted his countess into the parked carriage. She settled on the seat opposite him with a gusty sigh. Tipping her head back against the swabs pushed her breasts out and bared the arch of her lovely neck.

For a wild moment, he wondered if his wife was trying to entice him. She had stormed into his room a few nights back and kissed him. Though it had been a brief caress, which aroused his senses, he had felt the anger in it.

After months of frustrated longing, maybe a kiss or two was what they needed to explore their compatibility as man and wife.

“Prue?”

She shifted her gaze to his. “Husband?”

“A few nights ago, you opened that connecting door between us

for the first time in years.”

Her eyes suddenly sparked with a brilliant light. “That I did.”

“Why?”

“I wanted to be a wife in more than name,” she said huskily.

His heart started to beat a swift tempo. “You are certain of this desire?”

“Yes.”

He did not understand it, and while the change in her enticed him, it also perplexed Oscar. What was responsible for his wife transforming from a shy miss who stuttered and could not meet his eyes, who would faint at the thought of bedding him, to this daring creature who held his stare without blushing or lowering her lashes?

“I am a man of varied sexual experience,” he said, folding his arms across his chest and watching her from beneath lowered lashes. “Since you fainted on our wedding night, I determined I would wait until you were...more mature before I considered bedding you. Your shyness and anxiety were the reasons I stayed from your bed, countess. I realized you were simply too young for the demands I would make on your body.”

A slight frown drew her brows together, but she made no reply.

“I promise you countess...they are explicit and strenuous demands which would be shocking to a lady of your profoundly delicate sensibilities.”

“How exhilaratingly phrased,” she murmured with provocative humor glinting in her dark-green eyes.

*Perhaps I need not wait anymore to consummate our marriage.* The thought slid darkly tempting against his senses.

“You are very different than the girl I married.”

That girl had been unable to look at him without blushing.

“The woman before me seems as if she yearns for adventure... passion...there is nothing at all shy about her.” *I like it a lot.*

To Oscar’s undying shock, she lifted a foot and slowly rested it beside his right thigh, the motion dragging the skirts of her gown

up to her shin. Then she lifted the other foot and placed it beside his left thigh. The fragrant scent of her surrounded him, seducing Oscar.

*Bloody hell.* He blinked, but the scintillating and provocative vision did not dissipate. He was perfectly positioned between her spread legs with her dress ridden up to reveal silken stockings. If he were to grip her ankles, tug them at the same time he bore down on her, his cock would fit perfectly against her quim. “Prudence—”

He had to stop speaking, for his voice was a damn croak.

“Do I seem shy and stuttering to you now, husband?”

“No.”

“Then what are you waiting for...,” she slowly blinked her thick, black lashes, “to ravish me?”

## Chapter Seven

**P** rue was decidedly, wonderfully tipsy, and exquisitely aroused by her husband's frank words. "You seem speechless, my lord," she murmured wickedly. "Have I truly shocked a man of your worldly experience?"

"You teasing minx, another side of you that is most interesting."

Tapping her chin, she said, "I also enjoy riding and archery. Even embroidery I find particularly soothing."

He let out a slow, deep breath. "I know of your love for riding. Whenever I visited the country, I usually stared from my bedroom window and watched you ride across the lawns. You did not seem shy when you rode...but so wonderfully free and daring."

She gasped. "My early morning rides I thought no one knew of?"

He lightly stroked a finger over her right ankle. "Yes, I particularly enjoyed watching the ones you did in breeches, astride."

It was as if his fingertip singed her flesh through her silk stockings. "You never stopped me," she murmured. "Your mother saw me once when she visited with your sisters. The dowager countess was displeased with my conduct."

"Did that make you stop?"

"No."

Admiration and something indefinable lit in his eyes, warming her.

"You seemed happy. I liked seeing you like that."

“Why?” she whispered.

“I enjoy your laughter. And I loathed it the instant the smile dropped from your face whenever you saw me. I seemed to suck away at your joy, so I stayed in town as much as possible and only visited the estate when necessary. I will admit that at times I was pulled back there simply to see you.”

Since their dreadful wedding night, she had been so uncertain about everything; she would blush or stutter in his presence. How silly they both had been. “I also like gardening.”

“I know of it as well.”

Her husband had been keenly watching her over the last three years. And what did she know of him? Little to nothing. She tried to dismiss the growing ache that swelled through her body and squeezed her heart. “What do you enjoy, Oscar?”

A lock of his dark hair fell forward onto his forehead. Prue leaned forward quite aware of how the motion pushed the skirt of her dress higher up to her knees. She tenderly brushed aside that lock of hair. “Will you tell me?”

He rubbed the back of his neck, as if he felt uncomfortable with revealing a bit of himself. “There is not much to tell, countess. I enjoy painting very much.”

“I never knew it. I would love to see your work sometime.”

He gave a brief nod and a smile.

Prue sighed drowsily. “I believe it is time I start sharing your bed.”

Her husband made a rough sound in his throat. “Hold your tongue and ideas, countess.”

“Why should I?” The carriage lurched, and Prue pitched forward. A dark thrill coursed through her veins, and her heart fluttered wildly in her breast. She could have halted her momentum, but she aided it, so she ended up in her husband’s lap with her knees bracketing his outer thighs. “What providence,” she said, laughing softly, brushing a kiss right along the underside of his jaw.



Prue wiggled a little closer so that she was seated closer to his erection. Her husband gripped her hips, and a harsh breath shuddered from him. She slipped her hands around his neck, hugging him close to her body. Prue could feel his heartbeat thudding against her own. Her husband was just as affected by their proximity. Still, she was glad she had consumed four glasses of champagne at the pleasure gardens. Otherwise, without this liquid courage rushing through her veins, she might not have been so daring.

The possessive manner in which that brash woman had stared at Oscar had also roused Prue's own ire and jealous heart. She lightly nipped his chin. "I am not very countess-like, am I?"

He huffed out a strained laugh. "I cannot credit myself, but I am quite enjoying you like this."

"And did you enjoy seeing your Clarice tonight?"

"She is not mine, and unequivocally no, I did not like seeing her."

"Good. I am not afraid to challenge you to a duel should you ever try to dishonor me with that harpy or anyone else."

Her husband laughed, the sound low, heated, and so very masculine.

Prue combed her fingers through his hair and pressed the lightest of kisses at the corner of his mouth. "I can tell you doubt the veracity of my claims," she whispered against his lips. "However, your countess is very skilled in fencing, boxing, and in using a bow and arrow. I can also drop you on your perfect arse, my lord."

His entire body had stiffened. "My arse is perfect, is it?"

She loved how close their mouths were as they whispered to each other. It was intimate and evocative. "Very muscularly so. And I should be the only woman admiring it, my lord."

A pulse of silence, then he said, "I am a man who takes my vows seriously. Believe in that, my countess."

"Then I will."

She wriggled on his lap, trying to get closer even though they were already fitted so tightly together. Prue felt like she wanted to crawl into his skin and then invite him into hers.

“*Bloody hell.*” He shifted her as if he did not want her to know his body was aroused.

“Too late,” she murmured.

“Where have you learned such skills, countess?” he asked in a strangled breath.

Instead of answering, Prue shifted her mouth to his ear, surrendering to the chaotic hunger crawling through her body for her husband. After taking a steady breath, she whispered her desires.

THE MUTTERED CURSES that spilled from Oscar should never be uttered in the presence of a lady. Especially someone as sweet and delicate as his wife. The words that were just whispered from her innocent lips were simply the product of his very aroused and carnal imagination.

*It must be.*

“What did you say, countess?” *Sweet mercy, let it be my fevered lust playing havoc with my mind.*

His wife wiggled on his lap, leaned back so he could see her face clearly. The corner of her eyes crinkled with her smile, her lips parted. “Lay me down on the cushions and lick my quim.”

Good God, she really had said it the first time. And his body reacted with a wicked pulse of hunger. Lick her quim, something he had dreamed about but had known he would never be able to indulge in with his shy wife. Their gazes locked, and in the depth of her emerald eyes, he spied the dare. Take me, it said. He pressed his fingers against her stocking-clad leg and stroked upward to the edges of her garter. He allowed his fingers to tease its edges before slowly skimming the soft underside of her thigh. At the base of her

throat, her pulse fluttered madly, and her eyes grew heavy-lidded with desire. Her instinctive response to him was so powerful it rushed to his head...and to his cock, which swelled with pulsating need.

He tried to recall the reasons he stayed from her bed and drew a blank. The silence lengthened until finally, he said, "You are foxed."

She slipped a hand from his shoulder to hold up her gloved hand to his face, her fingers positioned as if she were pinching salt. "Only a little."

Taking that hand to her mouth, she bit the tip of the glove and tugged it from her hand. Those bare fingers settled across his mouth, tracing the curve of his lips.

"I can just imagine how soft these will feel against me. Will I like it, I wonder...you tasting and licking me...there."

Oscar was torn between throttling his countess and kissing her senseless. Nothing about her in this moment made sense. His wife was a shy innocent miss. Where did she get this provocative knowledge? Something cold and heavy settled into his gut. He was not a man prone to excessive emotions, but the feelings that slithered through him then scared the hell out of him. They were too unknown, as if they belonged to another gentleman entirely.

"Where do you draw your information from?"

Prue yawned but made no reply.

Oscar stared at his wife and repeated his question once again in a calm, modulated tone. He loathed that his gut was knotted with jealousy. This time she blinked sleepily. Too much libation. "You are exhausted," he murmured.

A sheepish smile bloomed on her mouth, and once again, she appeared the sweet ingénue. His longing only increased. Oscar gently rearranged her so that she sat sideways onto his lap. With another yawn, she snuggled low into his arms, resting her head on his shoulder. The ease at which she fell asleep told him of the trust she now had in him.

*Then do not betray that trust with ugly suspicions,* he silently warned himself.

The carriage arrived at their home in Mayfair only a few minutes later. Gently rousing her, they exited the equipage and made their way inside their townhouse. They climbed the stairs in silence, and he escorted her to her chamber. At the door, she peered up at him, her eyes wide and uncertain. The boldness had been tempered, and the soft vulnerability in her gaze abated the cold feeling winding in his gut.

“Good night, countess. We shall speak in the morning.”

She hesitated briefly, her gaze lingering on his mouth for fraught seconds before she tipped onto her toes and brushed a soft kiss onto his jaw. It was as gentle as the brush of a butterfly’s wing but no less arousing. It really shook him how easily she stirred his longings.

“Good night, my lord.”

Then she opened the door, slipped inside like a silent waif, and closed it. Oscar walked down to his door and entered his chamber. A fire roared in the hearth, shaving away some of the chills in his body. Sitting on the edge of his bed, he removed his shoes and stockings without the aid of his valet. With almost frustrated motions, Oscar removed his jacket and untied his cravat. He wanted to storm her room and demand an answer. Yet there was a part of him that was reluctant to go anywhere near his wife when he felt so off-kilter. Still, he stood, padded to the connecting door, and gripped the latch. His blood stirred hungrily at the thought of seeing her again.

*I should wait until tomorrow; there is nothing urgent that warrants a discussion now.* Despite that reminder, he could not step away. If a bounder had seduced his wife, damn the threat of scandal, he would bury the man. Dropping his forehead against the oak, Oscar closed his eyes tightly and shored up his restraint before opening it.

## Chapter Eight

Prue jumped onto her bed at the exit of her maid and slumped against the pillows, the voluminous nightgown frothing around her before settling down. She had done everything right, and her husband had still gone to his room, alone. Perhaps she had been too natural. Prue had decided the best foot forward was to be honest with him in all her interactions. She was miffed that Oscar had made no attempt to ravish her, and Prue was also a bit mortified she had appeared so wanton.

What must he think of her? Even if she had shocked him, there would be no changing of herself. The very idea of being false with him was abhorrent. If they were to form a sincere, loving attachment, they could only do that by being honest and genuine with each other. She had clearly enticed him, but something had caused his shutters to come down.

“I am a poor temptress. That is what I am,” she muttered into a pillow. “I’ll have to visit the club for some guidance.”

The connecting door was suddenly thrust opened. With a gasp, Prue launched to her feet, her hand pressing against her chest. Her husband framed the doorway, his feet bare, his cravat undone, and his shirt rolled to his elbows, showing arms roped with muscles. His hair was delightfully mussed and in his eyes glowed something almost feral.

Her nipples unexpectedly tightened, and heat flushed her body. “Oscar?”

He closed the door firmly behind him and leaned against it. Her

husband seemed dangerous. They stood there staring at each other, his intensity almost frightening her.

“Wife...”

She took a single step closer to him. “Yes, husband?”

“How did you learn about the pleasure of a man eating a lady’s quim?”

*Oh!* There was a lengthy pause, and a thick silence fell over the bedchamber. Now she understood the lethal expression in his eyes. Instead of being wary, the signs of his possessiveness sent a dark thrill down her spine once more.

“Though I do not know about the pleasure a woman feels when her sex is licked, I am not as ignorant as you think, my lord.”

His eyes narrowed as he clearly mulled over her words. “I am going to kill the bounder who dared to teach you such things, slowly and painfully.”

Prue lifted a shoulder in an elegant shrug. “You can do so if you feel it necessary to murder a book. I hardly think it a crime. I, too, have never betrayed our vows. My knowledge is from wonderful, explicit, erotic literature.”

He closed his eyes and muttered something that she did not hear. Prue took another step closer. “Is that why you came to my chamber...to fulfill my desire?”

His eyes flew open, and he had straightened from the door. “A gentleman must not be overly base and passionate with his wife.”

“Why not?”

“It is just not done.”

“Says who?”

He stood very still, his eyes narrowed. “It is common knowledge, my lady. I am surprised this book did not detail this.”

“Perhaps it is common knowledge among fools.”

Something gleamed in his eyes as if her words amused him. Prue took another step closer. “So if not their wives, who do gentlemen have a relation with like this?”

“Those lusts are reserved for a mistress or casual lovers.”

Prue stared at her husband. "I am astonished a man of your wit and intellect would say such nonsense."

He blinked, then a slow smile curved his mouth. "Are you insulting me, countess?"

"Of course I am." She folded her arms underneath her breasts, suddenly furious. Was this what men told themselves to keep mistresses? That ladies were too delicate to manage their lust. "The images I saw...men had their faces buried between women's thighs. Women had men's manhood in their mouths."

He slapped a hand across his forehead as if tortured. "I beg you, woman, have mercy, say no more."

Prue took another furious step forward. "Do you have desires like these, Oscar?"

"Yes," he all but snarled.

"And you are to never experience them with me because... because I am *too* ladylike?"

A muscle ticked in his jaw, and his silence was its own reply.

"What bacon-brained rubbish. All women are sensual creatures. A lady will not faint away at the sight of her husband's desire!"

He rose a mocking brow, and Prue flushed at the memory of her faint. "Since you have these desires, how will you have them sated?"

"With a mistress, if I wish it," he snapped, his eyes stormy with frustration.

"Did you not tell me earlier I should always believe in your fidelity?" With a wave of pained anger driving her, Prue slipped under his guard, hooking her right foot around his less dominant foot, and flipped him. Her husband went down, and she followed him, landing on his chest. Before he could gather his wits, she straddled his belly and leaned down so he could see the furious promise in her eyes.

"I landed you on your arse, husband, with ease," Prue said, "Should you ever dare take a mistress, I will challenge you to a duel to defend my honor, and this is the least of what I shall do."

He looked at her intently. "That, my dear, was my raw frustration talking. Forgive me."

"No," she snapped, hating that her lips wobbled. "You will have to work for it."

"Very well."

"I—"

Her husband grabbed her hips, dragged her with such strength over his stomach and chest. He slid his hands beneath her buttocks and lifted her to his mouth. Prue wobbled, her knees instinctively bracketing his ears. *What is happening?* Mortification flushed through her. She was *sitting* on her husband's face, her nightgown billowing over his head. She tried to move, and he clamped her into position. Then she felt the heat of his mouth as it teased the curls of her womanhood.

*Oh, God!* "Oscar, what—"

Her cry of shock tapered off into a wanton gasp as he stabbed his tongue between the slick folds of her sex. His lips covered the swollen bud of her clitoris, drawing it into his mouth. Prue screamed, her body arching at the pure shock of pleasure rushing through her system.

She whimpered, arching in a plea for more, as her husband licked her quim as she'd demanded. The pleasure was frightening and wonderful. Her thighs trembled fiercely, and she gripped the carpet as a piercing ache traveled from her clitoris, which he sucked and nibbled to her breasts. With each lick, a coil grew tighter and tighter, low in her belly until the sensation bordered on the knife-edge of pain. She did not understand the sensations crawling through her body. It was agonizing but also exquisite.

He tongued from the top of her clitoris down to the slit of her sex. Then up again before sucking that bud into his mouth once more. Sweat beaded along Prue's upper lip and slicked down her shoulder blades and spine. The nightgown, which had felt cool and free earlier, now felt suffocating.

The heat was *everywhere*, and it was simply too much.



Desperate for the coil in her belly to snap, she jerked her hips, hoping to escape his tormenting mouth. He gripped her buttocks even tighter. Prue was certain the globes of her derriere would show the indentations of his fingers in the morning. "Oscar, I—"

Her wail was suspended as he did something different with his mouth. The suck was wetter and more lascivious...as if he covered her entire quim and kissed it deeply. Blissful heat blossomed through Prue. Her body shattered, and her mind flew apart as she tumbled over the edge into ecstasy. Prue moaned and weakly leaned to the side to tumble off her husband's face.

*Oh, God, his face!*

She was still shaking from the devastating pleasure when his shadow fell over her. His lips glistened, and she blushed.

"That was your first climax," he murmured huskily and pleased.

She nodded, hated that she felt exposed and shy.

"I am so bloody torn," he growled, his expression one of savage arousal. "I want to wring more from you with wild fucking but also sweet loving."

Something wonderful clutched at her heart, and she slipped her hands around his nape. "Then give me both," Prue whispered achingly. "I am your *wife*...with whom you should explore all your desires."

"My wife," he said gravely.

"Yes...your wife."

Perhaps it was her whimsy, but she felt something invisible snap in place between them. She waited, barely breathing. Oscar kissed her, softly...tenderly...and her mouth trembled against his, and an ache rose up behind her eyes.

*Do not cry, you ninny*, she scolded herself, only for the thought to be drowned away under the onslaught of a much deeper and erotic kiss. She tasted herself on his mouth, and it only aroused her senses further. She'd hungered so many times for her earl to kiss her, but never in her wildest dreams had she imagined that his mouth would be so hot, his taste so wickedly carnal *and* delicious.

A kiss wasn't just an act...a prelude to sexual intimacy. It was everything. Kisses bespoke hunger and cravings that would otherwise be impossible to communicate. Their tongues danced together in an evocative duel, one that was slow and sensuous. Somehow, he rolled with her until he whisked the nightgown over her head. The carpet prickled over her skin, for beneath it, she was gloriously naked. Prue fought the blush as his gaze devoured her entire body, and a delightful shiver of wanting ran through her. She was also inordinately grateful for the dim light in her bedchamber. His touch against her cheek was like soft petals. The tenderness brought a sweet ache to her chest, and she smiled up at him.

"You are so beautiful," he murmured. "I am a damn fool. What a treasure I've had right in front of me."

Her heart staggered. Never had he looked at her with such reverent care. "I..." Prue did not know what to say, so she tugged his head down and joined their mouths.

She liked the way he kissed her. Slowly, yet so intensely as if he wanted to consume her. As if her body was a canvas he painted on, his hands coasted over her skin, touching, and caressing, and lingering everywhere. Every touch was a blaze of fire. A promise of pleasure. An echo of longing.

*I missed you for these three years, Oscar. How I wished we had not waited...*

Without releasing her mouth from his ravenous kisses, he thumbed her nipples between his fingers until they were so sensitive, she could scarcely bear the pressure. Lifting his mouth from hers, his lips seared a path down to her neck, her shoulders, and to the mounds of her quivering breasts. Then he wetted one tormented tip with his tongue while his hand continued down between her legs. Those fingers stroked over her sex, the caress almost unbearable in its tenderness, the very opposite of his mouth as he bit and kissed along her breast. Oscar used nimble fingers to pinch and circle her clitoris until she was mortifyingly wet and

once again convulsing in his arms as bliss speared her.

The pleasure was too much.

“Our first time will not be on the bloody carpet,” he murmured, rolling from her body, and standing. He swept her, weightless, into his arms and turned to the connecting door with effortless strength. It was to his bed that Oscar took Prue and spread her in the large center before covering her like a sensual blanket. He pushed one muscular thigh between hers to make perfect space for his weight.

“I want to see you,” she said, tugging at the buttons of his shirt.

Oscar pushed from the bed and hurriedly undressed. Prue came up onto her elbows, her legs still wantonly splayed to observe her husband. A savage hunger burned in the gaze that never moved from her while he stripped. Her husband was a fine specimen, much more appealing than the figures shown in the erotic literature. With each layer of clothing removed, she couldn’t tear her gaze away from his broad shoulders, his sculpted chest and abdomen, and hard thighs. He was beautifully formed. And...good heavens! The book lied. Her husband’s manhood was much larger and thicker than was portrayed.

Unexpected tension knotted her belly as she recalled this was supposed to hurt. *Such rubbish*, she reminded herself. Everything this far had been sublime, and she had been preparing by pricking the tip of her fingers with needles for three years.

Oscar pressed his thick length against her aching folds and inched forward. She clasped his shoulder at the tight, stretching sensation felt at his invasion. “Oscar?”

He paused, his body slightly trembling. “Yes.”

“Kiss me,” she said, her words trembled as anxiety warred with the promise of pleasure.

He caught her mouth in a kiss, one that was tender and almost apologetic, as his hips flexed and he thrust deep. The scream of shock exploded from her mouth, and he swallowed it, pressing quick kisses to her mouth, saying soothing nonsense she did not want to hear. A burning pain sizzled from where they were joined

and bloomed up to her belly in a piercing cramp. She ripped her mouth from his, panting. He shifted, and Prue cried out as the pain worsened.

“Do not move,” she said on a sob, hating that her voice was rough with tears. *Worse...* “Oh dear,” she whispered, as darkness edged her vision and she fainted underneath her husband.

## Chapter Nine

Oscar wanted to slam his fist into a wall. He had fucked his wife into a dead faint. He was a damn rutting ass who needed a good wallop. What had he been thinking to kiss and touch her with such carnality, and it was her first time? He should have been more mindful of her sensibilities and delicate nature, but he had been beset with lust for his countess. He had allowed her to ride his face, and he had pleased her cunny until she screamed, and then...

*Damn it all to hell.* She should have been peppered with slow sweet kisses, the lamp muted to preserve her dignity, and then he should have possibly used more oil to ease his way into her body. She had been so damn tight it was a miracle he had fitted. He knew he was a large man, but she had been so slick and wet, Oscar had been confident in the way he had prepared her body.

*I was too damn crude and eager.*

Regret churned in his gut. He hated that he had brought her such pain. Tears had leaked from her eyes. *Fuck.* The harsh, crude curse did not relieve the tension in his body. Oscar gently traced his fingers over her brows after cleaning the blood stains away and dressing her in the voluminous nightgown, he gathered her into his arms and took his countess into her chamber. She did not stir, and he thought it would be best she woke in a room that was comforting and familiar.

Tucking the sheets to her chin, he went to the hearth and stoked the fire. Once he was done, he padded toward the

connecting door, only to pause. This was too reminiscence of their wedding night. She had fainted; he had deposited her to her room and then left for town the very next day.

Turning around, he walked over to her bed and around to the other side. He climbed on, folding his arm behind his head, and staring at the ceiling. A few minutes later, a soft mutter came from her. Turning his head, Oscar stared at her. Prue still slept, but now she turned to him as if seeking the heat of his body. He smiled when she rolled until she was curled into his side. A sigh of delight slipped from her, and then her deep breathing filled the chamber.

Oscar closed his eyes, and despite the tempting closeness of his cock and his aching balls that were still desperate for relief, he fell into a deep slumber.

“Oh, dear!”

It was that familiar refrain that had Oscar opening his eyes to see the bedchamber had the soft gray shade of early dawn. A hard rain plunked down on the roof and the windows of her chamber. The house was still, and he suspected the household servants were still abed. That meant it was not yet five in the morning. His wife had scooted to the very edge of the bed, the sheets tugged up to cover her mouth. Her green eyes were wide and pinned on him, her hair sticking out from several ends. He couldn't help smiling at the madcap picture she presented. “Good morning, wife,” Oscar murmured.

“I fainted,” she whispered. “Again.”

“That you did.”

“I am mortified.”

“I never thought my cock could have shriveled so quickly.”

Her eyes widened to the size of saucers. “I see.” She cleared her throat delicately. “You dressed me.”

“Only in your nightgown.”

She made a soft sound in her throat but said nothing more. They stared at each other, and unexpectedly the corner of her eyes crinkled, and she giggled. The sweet sound bloomed into a peal of

laughter that filled his chest with sunshine. He didn't understand the infectious nature, but he chuckled, then he too started laughing, releasing the last bit of tension in the air. They laughed like two fools, and it felt natural to reach out and draw her into his arms. She did not resist but rolled into him, settling her head against his chest.

"I do not believe I have ever heard you laugh before, husband," she said breathlessly. "I like it."

Bloody hell, she smelled good. Felt even more perfect pillowed onto his chest.

"Then I will endeavor to do it more." *Just for you.* "Now tell me, why did you faint?"

She lightly stroked a finger over the hard planes of his stomach. "It is silly."

"I would still like to hear it," he murmured. "I would hate for you to faint every time I take you to my bed."

"And how often will that be?" she asked pertly.

"Every morning and night."

She shifted a bit to tilt her face up to his. "Is that possible?"

Oscar smiled. With the way she made him feel, he would bet his prime stud horses it was possible. At least until they sated each other, and a part of him wonder if he would ever get enough of her sweet taste or the heady arousal her responses brought forth. "We shall discover together, countess."

Her cheeks reddened prettily, but she did not look away from him. He lowered his head and touched her lips, kissing her softly, gently...lovingly. Oscar wanted to reassure her that she was safe, and she would face no judgment in his arms.

"Since I was little...I faint when I feel pain and at the sight of blood," she confessed, lowering her face and curving into his side once more. "I hurt myself once. It was bad. All I remembered was the awful pain and the blood."

*Devil take it.* He rubbed her shoulder soothingly. "How old were you?"

“Eight. I fell from my pony. I recall screaming at the blood wetting my riding habit. I was horrified at the sight and the scent. I wasn’t sure what was scarier. The blood or the faint. My sister told me I fainted. Of course, when I woke, it was all like a distant dream. I never knew I would have such a reaction again until I was about twelve. I badly pricked my finger with an embroidery needle. As the blood beaded on the tip of my finger and the ache spread...it was as if my body separated from my mind. I hazed, and I fainted.”

His wife’s voice was rich with mortification.

“Since then, the idea of pain and blood frightens me. It is silly, for I am a grown woman!”

“It is not silly, Prue. It is a response to an event that was very traumatic.”

“But I cannot stop myself from having the reaction. That is what I hate the most.”

Her voice sounded small and muffled. A quick glance showed she had drawn the sheets up to hide her face. He tugged the sheets down and used a finger to lift her chin. “That little flaw does not change the fact you are a brave lady.”

Her brows winged down in a frown. “Brave?”

“You got back onto a horse, and you are an excellent rider today.”

Her eyes widened, and then she looked absurdly pleased with herself. “I *am* excellent, aren’t I? It was petrifying to restart my lessons, but I did not want the fear to cripple me. Only four months later, I found the courage to start riding again.”

He lowered his head and kissed her brow. “And one day, you will overcome this too. Believe in that, countess. And if you do not, it does not make you less.”

Oscar was not sure if he should speak with her about the painful ordeal that was childbirth. *Hell*. One step at a time. His countess was young. There was no rush for him to get his heir. He would try his best to ensure she did not fall with child for a few



years. That way, they would have another three or more years to get to know each other before introducing children. His mother, who was already haranguing him about an heir and a spare, would simply have to keep her nose out of their marriage.

“Now show me your badge of bravery.”

She scuttled from his arms to push aside the sheets. Oscar loved that she displayed no maidenly shyness or blushes in showing him a part of her body. Baring her legs, his wife revealed a scar on her shin. It was long and wide but not garish. Still, he grabbed her foot and lifted it. With a gasp, she fell back onto the bed, laughing breathlessly. Raising her foot to his mouth, he gently kissed the scar, then up to the back of her knee.

She gasped and giggled.

“My wife is ticklish,” he murmured, tormenting her flesh with soft bites.

His wife bit into her lower lip, and her throat swallowed. “Oscar?” she said, her voice husky with arousal.

“Yes?”

“I would like to see one of your paintings.”

“Now?”

Their gazes met, and in the depths of the emerald beauty of her eyes, he spied fright. *It will not hurt the next time.* He wanted to assure her of this, but it was better to show her. Lowering her foot, he tossed aside the sheets and pushed himself off the bed.

“You’re naked!”

He bent and grabbed his trousers, shaking them out before slipping them on. “I always sleep naked, countess.”

He didn’t bother to dress in full but held out his hand. Pushing down her nightgown, she scrambled from the bed and took his hand. They left her chamber, hurrying along the darkened corridor. His wife muffled her laugh.

“It feels as if we are sneaking around. It is exciting,” she whispered.

He took her to the room he claimed as his workspace. Opening

the door, they spilled inside. Padding over to the window, he pulled back the heavy drapes allowing a measure of light to fill the room. The room was rather large and had several windows to allow in natural light. The room also overlooked a pretty garden and a birdhouse. Several paintings, all his, hung on the wall. At least three easels with wooden chairs were positioned near the windows, and a dark green chaise longue with golden edges was by the fire. His wife gasped, and he turned around. Awe suffused her features as she stared at his work.

“Oscar,” she breathed, walking over to a painting of her on her horse. “This is beautiful. When you said you painted, I never imagined work so flawless and powerful, done with such rare precision and realism. Why do you keep this to yourself?”

A rush of pleasure filled him at her admiration. “Habit,” Oscar answered. His art was his and only his. *Expect now I am sharing it with you.*

She whirled to face him. “When did you start painting?”

“According to my mother, I waddled into the art room, picked up her brush and made my first brush stroke at two years of age. I’ve never stopped painting. It is a great love,” he admitted.

“I...you are incredibly talented.”

He strolled over to the painting, perusing it critically. He supposed it was a lovely one. Whenever he painted, it was as if he went to a different world, one in which he felt great emotions and was pushed to capture it on canvas. Prue walked from painting to painting, gasping at times and reaching out hesitantly to touch a portrait of herself sitting embroidering. There were several of her, one of her in a favorite dress of white and silver she had worn to a recent ball, another of her looking demure besides a bouquet of roses and other flowers. Another showed her riding her chestnut mare. There were several of a large and snooty cat which were rendered with considerable affection.

His wife gave a quick gasp of utter astonishment. “These should be in a gallery. They are so lifelike and vibrant.”

“Earls do not paint or show their work to the public,” he said with a measure of amusement.

Her eyes softened as she stared up at him. “Is that what your family believes?”

Oscar raked his fingers through his hair, suddenly uncomfortable with the direction of their conversation. “It was what my father believed,” he said gruffly.

“Do you resent him for it?”

“No.”

At her stare, he expounded, “I wanted to enter the Royal Academy. I wanted to study art. With the responsibilities I was to inherit, it was not possible. I studied land management, mathematics, philosophy, French, Greek, Latin, history, geography, great literature and politics.”

She hurried over to him, lifted a hand to his jaw and cupped it. The warmth in that caress thawed the cold knot he hadn’t realized was forming. “I am sorry, Oscar.”

He held her hand to his jaw. “Do not be. I am my parents’ only son. I have no regrets in fulfilling my duties.”

Her expressive eyes glittered with unshed tears. “But your art....”

He stroked a finger over her cheek. “My art is for me. I endure no loss at not having it displayed to be admired by the *ton*.”

The tender look in her eyes unraveled him, and oddly he felt undeserving of it.

“I am glad you shared it with me.” His wife lifted onto her toes to press a kiss at the corner of his mouth. Her caress lingered, and he closed his eyes against the sensations evoked. Such trembling desire mystified him. When she stepped away from him slightly, Oscar traced his finger over the soft curve of her cheek down to her pointed chin. “Of recent years, you have been my favorite subject.”

“I noticed at least six paintings of me.”

“Only six?” It truly felt like he had done dozens more, given the

hours he had spent on them.

“Yes. You seem to have the same amount of your cat.”

“Ah, Cleopatra. She’s the jealous sort. I had to do her a similar justice.”

“I do not fancy cats.”

“The devil you say. Are you allergic?”

“No. One scratched me as a child.”

“You’ll love Cleo. She is a right queen and would never behave so badly.”

His wife laughed softly.

“I’ve longed to paint you naked.”

She stared at him for a long moment, her lips slightly parted, then a half-smile appeared. Prue once again rose on the tip of her toes, encircled her arms around his neck and fitted her lush mouth to his. Oscar groaned, holding her tightly to his body.

He had needed this. He slanted his mouth over hers, taking the kiss deeper and deeper in slow degrees. They kissed until Oscar trembled with the force of his desire. Lifting her into his arms, he walked with her over to the door, pressing her back against it.

She murmured something wordlessly against his lips.

“I am going to take you,” he said, giving her fair warning of his intention. “I promise I’ll do my damndest to ensure it does not hurt again...or if it does, it will be the sweet kind.”

His wife laughed against his kiss. “A sweet kind of hurt. Does such a thing exist?”

“Yes.”

“Truly?”

“Oh, yes.”

She nibbled at his bottom lip. His countess was a damn fast learner. “I am intrigued,” she murmured.

He swiped his thumb over her gratifyingly pink and swollen lips. “Let me show you.”

She opened for him, spreading her legs wide apart. Oscar took her mouth again, and while pinning her to the door with his

weight and the support of one hand, he tugged down the front of her gown and took her nipple into his mouth. He licked and sucked at that pebble until she moaned and shivered in his arms. Reaching down, he undid the flaps to his trousers, so eager for her his bloody hand shook.

Releasing her nipple from his mouth, he was gratified to see the tip swollen and wet. His cock arched and strained upward, seeking her softness and heat. Gripping her lush buttocks in his palms and leaning her against the door more, he positioned her over his throbbing manhood. Oscar rubbed himself against her slit, groaning at the wetness he found. She damned well soaked him. *Bloody hell*. She wanted him with the same intensity. Something awakened inside of him, a pulsating knot of hunger and tenderness for this woman in his arms.

Dropping his forehead against hers, he peered into her eyes that were dark and heavy-lidded with desire. "Do not look away from me, Prue."

She cupped his jaw with one hand while the other gripped onto his shoulders. "I like how you say my name. As if you are so desperate for me."

"I am," he groaned, kissing her while he inexorably pushed his cock deep inside her tight, clenching sex.

## Chapter Ten

Prue gasped when her husband thrust deep inside her, filling and stretching her. There was no pain, only pressure, and bliss. Her head fell back against the door, and she gripped his shoulders, panting. This was what she'd always wanted. Pinned to the wall in her husband's arms, and he bent on ravishment. *Passion*.

"Does it hurt?" he growled, holding himself still.

"I am not fainting," she teased softly.

He kissed her, hard and furious, sending the pit of her stomach into a wild swirl. Breaking his mouth from hers, Oscar shifted, pulling his cock from her slowly, so she felt every bit of him as her muscles held onto him too tightly as if she never wanted to let him go.

"*Fuck*," he muttered, the filthy word only arousing her more.

He flexed his hips, pushing deep inside her but so tortuously slow. There was a biting stretching pressure, an erotic blend of pain and pleasure. Suddenly she understood. "The sweet kind of pain," she whispered, licking the seams of his lips. "I feel it now, Oscar."

"Afraid?"

"I want more."

Lust fired in his eyes. "Wrap your legs around my back."

Prue coiled her limbs around his lower back, crossing her ankles, holding him tight. Their mouths melded, and he started to pump his hips taking her with quick, hard strokes, tossing her into mindless pleasure. He paused only to walk with her to the chaise

longue and gently ease her onto the cushions, their bodies still joined. And not once did he stop kissing her. Oscar moved within her with strong, firm thrusts, grinding deeply inside her body.

That tight coil and heated pleasure she had felt low in her belly when he licked her with his tongue started to build again. Ripping her mouth from his, she buried her face in the crook of his neck, tasting the salt of his sweat. She kissed his neck, his shoulders, her fingers raking his slicked sweat back as the coil in her belly drew tighter and tighter even as his thrusts became harder and deeper.

Prue hadn't dreamed anything could have felt this wonderful. Heart pounding, Prue was aching for more of his touch. With wordless murmurs and frantic kisses, she urged him on and was rewarded with a deep thrust that seemed to pierce the coil low in her belly.

Pleasure shattered Prue as her body flew apart. To her shock, her husband pulled from her body, slipped his hands beneath her buttocks, and arched her to his mouth. She wailed as he licked her quim, then sucked her clitoris into his mouth. This time it was as if pleasure expanded through her body, sweeping her up until she floated. And even then, her husband did not relent, bringing her to pleasure over and over again, before sliding impossibly deep once more into her convulsing body.

With a groan of rich satisfaction, he emptied deep inside her body.

"Bloody hell," he said, pressing a kiss to her forehead where damp tendrils of hair were pasted to her skin.

Prue sighed. "We must absolutely do this every day."

Her husband chuckled and gently pulled from her. Prue groaned for everywhere felt like she had gone several rounds of boxing with the girls at the club. Oscar stood and lifted her into his arms.

"We have to hurry and sneak back to your chamber."

Prue laughed. "What will we say if we encounter one of our servants."

He opened the door and stepped out into the thankfully empty hallway. They heard a thumping sound from the servants' staircase, and he stilled, then burst into a run. With a laughing gasp, Prue grabbed onto his shoulders as he jostled her. As they were about to rush into her bedroom, over his shoulder, she spied the shocked expression of her maid on the stairs. No doubt Martha was coming up to stir the fireplace.

Prue allowed her husband to clean her with a warm washcloth without blushing. She could not stop yawning and drowsily asked the time. It was not yet seven in the morning.

"I gather you will not be joining me for an early breakfast."

"Get behind me, Satan," she muttered. "I am desperate for sleep."

His laughter caressed over her in pleasurable waves. "I shall see you around noon then, my lovely wife."

Prue had the impression of a kiss on her mouth, but sleep was already dragging her down into blissful oblivion.

PRUE STIRRED AWAKE AND STRETCHED, expelling a loud satisfied sigh. She felt well-rested.

"It is almost two in the afternoon. I have delayed luncheon for you."

She gasped, twisting on the bed to see her husband sitting on the chaise longue by the fire, his large Siberian cat cuddled into his arms. The cat's eyes were closed, and the feline made soft purrs in its throat in time to the fingers stroking her head.

"What are you doing here? I thought you were to meet with your land steward at noon and then your banker at three?"

"I took the day off."

"You took the day off?" she parroted in surprise. "You never take the day off."

"I know. I thought I would spend it with my lovely wife. However, I did not foresee that she would laze the day away in bed."



Prue's cheeks heated, even as something warm and tender stirred inside her chest. An unknown sensation, but it felt very pleasant indeed. "It is only the afternoon. We still have hours left in the day."

Her husband made a non-committal sound, but his eyes gleamed with satisfaction when they landed on her. He stood and padded over to sit on the edge of her bed.

"Prudence, I would like to introduce you to my companion, Cleopatra. Only I can call her Cleo."

Prue grinned. "Is that so?"

"Yes, try it. She will ignore you."

Pure leaned forward, took one of the cat's paws and shook it. "Nice to meet you, Cleo."

The feline acted as if Prue was not there. The blasted thing even pulled its paw away. She canted her head. "Cleopatra?"

The cat glanced at her and swished its tail.

"I told you," he said with a roguish smile. "It's a bond. If you want the same thing, get your own cat."

She laughed and leaned in to meet his kiss. Lifting his head, he stared into her eyes for a long time. His expression was serious... considering.

"The oddest thing happened to me while you were sleeping. I am still mystified by it."

"What?" she whispered.

Oscar used the back of his fingers to rub against her cheek. The tender ministrations made her shiver and filled her with an inexplicable longing.

"I missed you," he said with a frown. "I have never missed you before...but today I did."

Her heart stuttered. "Is that a bad thing?"

"More curious as all things new to me are."

That right there hinted that their future might not be miserable at all but an exceedingly pleasant one. As if she was annoyed to be in the middle of their conversation, Cleopatra made a sound and

leaped from Oscar's arm and padded over to sprawl by the fire, and swished her majestic tail.

"That cat is spoilt," she said fondly.

"Distressingly so. I have to set a place for her at the table; she will not eat her kippers from a plate on the ground. Our housekeeper tries to pretend she is not appalled by it, rightly suspecting she might be fired if she offends Cleo."

Prue smiled at his outrageousness. "And to think, my dear husband, there was a time I worried that you might not have a sense of humor."

"The devil you say!"

"Yes, I even called you a stiff prig to a friend."

"Ah, my sweet, how much you still have to learn about me."

Prue slipped her arms around his neck and tugged him down to her. "Let's revisit the part where you missed me today."

He kissed the tip of her nose. "I did. Our servants must have thought me a madman the amount of times I ran up the stairs checking to see if you were awake. I missed your company enough I thought about tickling the bottoms of your feet to rouse you."

Prue didn't understand why he amused her so. Thunder rumbled in the distance, and soft plunks of rain started to fall again from the sky.

"Never fear," he murmured. "We can play chess and read together by the fire."

Ordinary, wonderful things husbands and wives did. She took a deep breath to calm her suddenly pounding heart. "I would like that, Oscar, very much."

ALMOST THIRTY MINUTES LATER, dressed in a high waist gown of emerald, Prue ventured into the library to meet with her husband. A steady downpour fell outside, and the sky was overcast and rumbling with occasional thunder. Despite the suddenly dreary afternoon, she felt buoyant and excited.

Oscar waited for her on the floor, a picture of stunning

masculinity in his indolent sprawl on the lush carpet. Even his shirt was unbuttoned, and she could see the skin of his throat. He was bare foot and his hair tousled as if he had raked his fingers through it several times. On a low table there was a scrumptious feast laid out. Prue spied two roasted quail, slices of roast pork, delicate chicken-filled pastries, paprika prawns, lobster patties, assorted cakes, and a decanter of spiced wine.

Predictably her stomach rumbled its hunger. Oscar glanced up. His gaze landed on her bare toes. Prue sauntered over and lowered herself onto the blankets and rugs. She loved that he sensed this is how she would prefer to spend the day instead of pretending formality in their own home.

The chess set was laid out between them, and three books were stacked one on top of the other. She ran a finger off the spine of the first book. "You read gothic romances, my lord?"

"I know they are a preference of yours. Do not worry; the second title is more to my liking."

Prue choked. "I will not read a book about machinery and farming."

"Do not dismiss it out of hand. It has some exciting concepts on crop rotations."

Picking up a chess piece, she tossed it at him but shrieked when he destroyed the setting of the board to haul her into his lap. They kissed for a long time before pausing so she could sate her hunger. They ate together, talking about all sorts of topics, from the tensions in his political party, to repairs that needed to be done at the ancestral estate. Afterward, they played seven rounds of chess, with Prue winning three of the set. The evening passed in a blur of laughter and reading and more kissing.

Butterflies fluttered around in her stomach, and warm and tender emotions wreaked havoc with her heart. With stunning awareness, Prue realized she was tumbling into love with her husband. Somehow in her quest for Oscar to fall in love with her, Prue had not thought about the fact that she was not in love with

him either. She liked what she knew of him, was wildly attracted to his handsomeness, and respected his political beliefs. But only now that she was learning her husband did her heart soften and ache for him in a manner it had not before.

The awareness felt frightening and also wonderful.

## Chapter Eleven

Oscar laughed as his countess thundered past him, thrusting her hands in the air and hollering her victory like a wild jungle woman. Amazement gripped him that she had this playful, competitive side. He should have known, when they played chess, he was not able to sneak in a kiss. Her concentration was too fierce, especially when she was determined to trounce him. She had been very determined to beat him in this race, and she had, fairly and impressively. His countess was a damn splendid horsewoman.

“Be careful you do not break your pretty little neck,” he shouted, considering she had not brought the horse to a standstill and still had her hands in the air.

Gripping the reins, she slowed the animal and spun to face him. They were at Hyde Park at the unholy hour at 4 in the morning so that his wife could ride freely in breeches without inciting a public scandal. One was already happening in his house. The bloody servants grinned from ear to ear whenever they spied him with his countess. Perhaps it was to be expected, for they had been wrapped in each other’s arms for the last two days, loving and laughing. And then yesterday, his butler had witnessed Oscar chasing his wife up the stairs, for she had gotten under his guard and tripped him in defiance of him after telling her she was forbidden to attend the scandalous, decadent masquerade ball Countess Meade hosted annually.

*“You think to order me about without hearing why I want to*

*attend?" she'd cried.*

*"I am your lord and master, and I said it will be far too scandalous for you to attend, for any decent lady of society to attend."*

She had spluttered for several seconds, and when he'd reached out to draw her into his arms, the minx had once again dropped him on his backside, with a toss of her head and a tart retort that no man was her master, not even one she loved kissing and bedding. Oscar had been stunned for a moment before he had recovered his wits and thought to retaliate, knowing of her ticklishness.

He was acting like a besotted fool when he had worked all his life to be practical and responsible. His father had left him with an estate laden with debt, its many lands and estates houses had been in dire need of funding to enable adequate repairs and staffing. Despite his wife's dowry having helped with the situation, he had to plan for supporting his children, wife, and family in the future. It was up to him to make sure his staff, workers and tenants were in good health and that their dependents were cared for. He had put aside a generous widow's portion for her—a stately manor in Derbyshire and a portion of ten thousand pounds a year.

Oscar should be in his study going over his investment reports and the expenditure on the new farming techniques which had been implemented at two of their minor estates including the necessary repair costs and some further investment there. He had managed their finances and investments with shrewdness lest he make the mistakes of his forefathers. The serious depredation on their family fortunes had not begun with his grandfather. His more distant ancestors had been a rum lot. Some had brought in funds by methods he considered unacceptable, dubious and in one case positively illegal. There were plenty of skeletons in his family closets that he did not want to examine too thoroughly. And he admitted to himself that the rest had been either incompetent wastrels or debauched spendthrifts. His grandfather seemed to have been the worst of the whole damn bunch of them. He had

combined licentious delusions of grandeur with utter selfishness and had apparently been incapable to budget or restrain his expensive tastes. Oscar was of the opinion that if his grandfather had not taken a devastating fall in the hunting field when reportedly in his cups that his descendants would be living in adject poverty. His father had tried his best to recover their fortunes and had made some retrenchment in the family expenses but had only sunken them into a deeper hole, for he had married for love and not practicality. No, the baton of saving the family had been passed to him, and he had done his duty.

Yet he had put aside work for today, the fourth day at that, simply to spend more time with his wife. A pastime he had immensely enjoyed. Oscar had discovered that he adored his wife's wit, humor, and her vivacity for life. He had to admit that she had never worried him by over-spending her allowance or insisting on getting involved in some half-baked scheme. She had been a good chatelaine to his homes, neither penny-pinching nor unduly wasteful. In fact, she had taken some of the onerous burden from his shoulders by her good management. He had not appreciated it sufficiently before, but he had noticed her care for the staff and that everything run more smoothly since their marriage. Although young and untried she had gained the respect of his people and the minor squabbles and disasters which had taken up much of his time had simply vanished with the arrival of his bride.

There was something about her that simply turned his world on its head. And not for the first time, he realized he was damned lucky the woman he married was not only charming in appearance and also delightful in her character.

Prue trotted over to him, tugging the cap she wore to protect her identity even lower over her face.

"That my lord was glorious, would you like to race once more? I think we have at least another hour before anyone else comes to the park."

He turned his horse about to trot beside her down the lane. "I

would like to know who taught you how to land a man on his arse.”

She sent him a swift and contemplative sideways glance. “Must I tell you?”

“Was it another man?”

She grinned. “You are so growly when you are possessive. I like it.”

He arched a brow and suppressed his smile at her teasing countenance.

“It was indeed a gentleman. However, he was a tutor, and I was never alone in a room with him.” She bit into her lower lip, worrying at the flesh with her teeth before she said, “I am worried you might not approve.”

An odd feeling pressed tightly against his chest. He stared at his wife’s expression for a long time. She was flushed and uncomfortable, but what he had come to know about her these last few days always indicated a woman of fierce loyalty and such kindness. The damn woman was also damnably possessive. He still recalled her threats to duel with him should he dishonor their vows. It stood to reason she would never be unfaithful. Something turned over inside his chest at the awareness that he trusted her when he had only learned to trust in himself since he had inherited the earldom when he was three and twenty.

“And you fear my disapproval?”

“More my reaction to it.”

How unusual. “And what reaction would that be, my lady?”

She wrinkled her nose. “More dropping on your derriere, I’m afraid. This place... is very important to me.”

They exited Hyde Park and trotted down the cobbled pavement.

“Tell me about this place.”

“It is a lady’s club.”

For a minute, his mind blanked. That was the last thing he expected to hear. “You mean a club like a gentleman’s club?”

She nodded carefully. “Yes. I have been a member for over a



year...and these ladies are more than friends; they are my sisters.”

“Prue,” he said, tugging on the reins to slow the horse’s trot. “I would never forbid from partaking in something that you care about so much.”

She sniffed. “I really do not like that word.”

He supposed it was ‘forbid.’ His little wife did not like the reminder that he had the power to control and dictate her choices and actions. And he saw it clearly now; it was the lady’s club which had helped her confidence and the painful shyness that he had become familiar with. “Where is this club?”

“48 Berkeley Square.”

“And you learn to fight there?”

“Yes, I’ve learned how to box, fence, and the art of taking down an opponent who is twice my size. You see, many ladies in society have found themselves helpless at the hands of libertines, rakes, and fortune hunters and are unable to defend themselves against their advances. The matron of our club believes it important all her members know some form of self-defense. But the club is more than that...it is...I cannot express how wonderful it is, Oscar. There is no malicious gossiping or pretension. We are true friends. Best of all, there are no foolish rules or strict adherence to propriety. We remove our shoes and stockings. We let down our hair. We sometimes smoke cheroots or drink brandy without any sanctimonious, judgmental prig to scold us for not being faultless pictures of propriety, which can be dreadfully tiresome to have to conform to.”

*Good God.* He schooled his expression before he was lumped into the category of a sanctimonious prig. A judgmental one at that. His wife smoked cheroots and drank brandy. Oscar wasn’t entirely sure how to feel about that. “Who is the owner of this club?”

“Our fearless leader is....” Prue frowned, casting him a suspicious frown.

Oscar rested a hand over his chest. “I swear upon my honor, all

that you say to me will be held in the strictest of confidence.”

A dazzling smile curved her mouth. “The new Duchess of Hartford is our leader, and Theo is so wonderful!”

A *duchess*? He vaguely recalled Lady Theodosia at Prue’s side at balls upon occasion. The impression of a beautiful lady with a radiant smile rose in his thoughts. Prue always seemed animated and happy whenever they spoke together. “Does her husband know about her club?”

“Of course, he does! They have a love match,” she said a bit wistfully.

“Oh, one of those,” he said dryly as they turned onto Russel Square.

Prue frowned. “You do not believe in love?”

“It exists,” he said mildly.

“That is all you have to say on the matter?” she asked with surprising graveness.

A strange sensation assailed him. “Are we now discussing love?”

“You seemed dismissive of the idea of a love match.”

Oscar suddenly felt like a fish out of water, trying to run on land. “If the duke and duchess are happy, good for them.”

Prue’s gaze searched his face as if she tried to peer into him. “I am not talking about them, Oscar.”

He scrubbed a hand over his face, entirely lost. Oscar slowly went back over their recent conversation. Keenly recalling every second to see what he had been missing. Then he regrettably reached the same conclusion he had come to before. He was a damn fish out of water and understood nothing. “I...I am not at all certain what we are discussing, Prue.”

“Do you not believe in love matches?”

“I believe they exist,” he said slowly. “I have met several seemingly intelligent lords and gentlemen who swore the instant they saw a particular lady across a ballroom it was love at first sight.”

His wife was silent at that statement, and they trotted for several minutes in silence. He was beginning to suspect that he had said the wrong thing.

“Do you believe in love, Oscar?”

“Certainly. I do.”

Oscar sensed she was far from satisfied with his answer, and something fierce jolted through his heart. Was his wife wondering if they had love between them? How the hell did one measure love? He did not believe that claptrap about seeing someone for the first time and simply falling in love with them. For him, love was about duty, responsibility, and sacrifice. Love was everything one did to protect their family from all harm and ensure they lived a safe and comfortable life. That was how he understood love. That was what he respected.

They guided their horses around to the mews behind their house and dismounted. She walked ahead of him, her head lowered, and what he could see of her face appeared pensive. Silence stood between them like a castle wall. Shutting him out and its walls unscalable. He feared she was deliberately putting distance between them and that the fragile foundations of their blooming intimacy might come crashing down if he did not think of the right thing to say.

“Prue?”

She paused and turned to listen to him. Walking up to her, he cupped her cheek and kissed her. For a moment, she was stiff in his arms, then with a soft sigh, she parted her lips and kissed him back. In the familiarity of their passion, a tight knot that had formed in his gut loosened, and the erratic pounding of his heart calmed. Breaking their kiss, he murmured, “Someone once told me I could be a bit bacon-brained.”

She giggled sweetly. “Never say so.”

“Whenever we speak, if there is something you want me to understand, do not hesitate to tell me, countess. Sometimes I need things to be spelled out to me explicitly. You are my wife and

lover.”

“Perhaps your friend too,” she whispered.

“Most definitely.” The truth of it resounded inside him. “Know that you can always confide in me.”

She smiled and looped her arm with his as they began strolling toward their home. Prue said nothing more on the matter of love matches, but Oscar couldn’t help feeling her light had dimmed a little. The eyes that peered up at him did not sparkle as brightly, nor did her smile seemed as unrestrained.

How unusual. It seemed he had much more to learn about his wife. However, that dimming of her luster disappointed him and he tried once more to examine what he had done that had caused it.

## Chapter Twelve

Later that night, Oscar sat in a comfortable chair at White's. The club was packed tonight, the supper-room, library, the card and gambling rooms overcrowded. He'd met with a few of his friends earlier to discuss the planned visit of George IV to Scotland, which would be the first appearance of a monarch there since 1651. There were members who thought the visit was a great waste of money and others who believed that it was long overdue that a monarch should visit his Scottish subjects, but now he sat alone nursing a glass of whisky. The large leather armchair creaked slightly as he leant back. His feet resting on the pristine but subtle carpeting. The high ceiling of the room with its elegant plaster molding was illuminated by hundreds of candles in sparkling chandeliers. The sound of clinking glasses and masculine laughter swirled around him, and the scent of cheroot and cigar smoke wafted in the air. Trent and another friend of theirs, Lord Welham, walked over and sat at his table.

"The gambling rooms are rather dull tonight," Trent said, motioning for a decanter of brandy.

"You look rather preoccupied, Wycliffe. Whatever are you thinking about," the viscount asked, leaning back in his chair with a sigh.

"Cheroots and brandy." Oscar took a long swallow of his drink. *And my wife*. He had learned so much about her in the long conversations they had in the night after loving each other with fierce passion. It was as if he could not get enough of his countess.

"Are you foxed?" Trent demanded.

"I have never been clearer. Tell me, Welham, have you ever shared a glass of port with your wife?"

The man choked on his brandy, his gray eyes widening. "With my *wife*?"

"Yes."

"Absolutely not! Ladies do not drink."

Amusement rushed through him. "Perhaps they indulge in private."

"I should be very astonished should they do so. Ladies are delicate creatures who do not own the constitution for strong spirits. Nor do they have the desire at all to sample it."

"You have confirmed this?"

Trent laughed. "The nature of your question is flummoxing. Only bawdy wenches who hardly understand the finer point of decorum drink like a man."

Not according to his wife. He thought of the other ladies in his life, his three sisters. Before they got married, their days were filled with calling on other society families accompanied by their mother. When not socializing, they spent their time reading, sewing, and receiving painting lessons, music lessons, and dance lessons. They indulged in long walks in the woods while in the country and attending balls when in town. They had never expressed any desire to him that would have struck him as unconventional. What if they owned those desires in their hearts but simply never spoke of them for fear of being censured?

Was that truly the way of it? Society and gentlemen expected their ladies to act a particular way, but in private, they were vastly different creatures. When he had started to look for a bride, he had found most young ladies uninspiring and now wondered if they became colorless because all rebellion had been squashed by rigid society expectations and enforced by their own mothers. He was not foolish enough to envisage that all ladies might feel like this, but that there was apparently sufficient to fill a club spoke of the painfully restrictive existence few men would comprehend.. The

very idea was...fucking appalling. Welham had been married for five years and Oscar knew he had two young children with his viscountess. Did he know anything about the true heart of his wife?

Trent and Welham's voices droned on in the backdrop of his thoughts. A strange pain rattled around inside Oscar's heart. He wanted to know Prue. All of her. What else did she do? What else did she hide from the sanctimonious priggish world and from him yet shared with her sisters at their club? Unexpectedly, he was damn glad she had found them, and they had been there for her when he had not. But he did not want to be excluded from her passions and joy. He wanted to be a part of them in every way. He wanted to inspire them and share them with her. He turned over those yearnings in his thoughts, truly amazed that he owned them.

"I am retiring for the night, gentlemen."

"The night is young," Trent said with an arched brow and a wolfish grin. "I even thought we could horn in on Lady Durham's ball. I hear it promises to be *salacious*."

"I'm not interested," Oscar said, standing. An hour later, he walked down his hallway to join his wife in the library. She was curled in her favorite chair with a book in her lap. She appeared flushed and shocked, letting him wonder at her reading material.

He cleared his throat, and she glanced up, hurriedly closing the book and slipping it behind her.

"You are home. I thought you were to spend the night at White's."

Shrugging out of his coat, he tossed it onto one of the settees. "That was my initial intention, but somehow I could not stop thinking about cheroots and brandy."

"Oh, dear."

He arched a brow. "Is that all you have to say, my lady?"

"It depends entirely on what your thoughts concluded, my lord."

"Ah, I shall tell you."

Her eyes sparkled with a challenge. "Please hurry. My nerves are not stiff enough to withstand rife anticipation."

Oscar removed his boots, jacket, and waistcoat before padding over to the mantle and poured brandy into two glasses. "I wondered at your brazenness in smoking, wife. I wondered if I should come home, turn you over my knees and spank you."

She made a choking sound low in her throat. A glance showed she stared at him with widened eyes and a mystified expression.

A faint wash of pink spread across her cheek. "Spank me!"

"Yes, though after I would kiss it better."

His countess appeared fit to faint. "My heart is pattering with such a delightful warning."

Such a quick and provocative wit. Oscar chuckled. How worldly she tried to appear, but her blush burned even redder. "I thought that as your husband, I should know the things you like and indulge them. Within reason, of course."

She stood and smoothed the front of her nightgown. "I do like the idea of being spoilt. Why should there be a reasonable boundary? I urge you to indulge to your heart's pleasure. Your lady is a willing participant."

He padded over to her and held out a glass. She stared at him with a frown.

"Oscar?"

"I think it is a damn shame that if my wife desires to drink, she cannot do this in the comfort of her own home. I thought, my lady, tonight you could share a drink and a cheroot with me."

Prue stilled, and in her eyes, he spied an emotion that he could not decipher. When those lovely green eyes filled with tears, he walked over to her side, setting the glasses down on the small table to her left.

"What is wrong, Prue?"

She tucked a wisp of hair behind her ears. "I...there is nothing wrong. Everything is perfect."

"You are fighting tears," he said gruffly, slipping his hand



around her waist and pulling her closer to him.

“They are happy tears,” she said with a smile that wobbled. “Three weeks ago, we were barely speaking, and now we are going to share a cheroot together.”

“Perhaps I should admit I only intended to allow you two draws.”

Predictably she laughed, the sound enchanting him.

He picked up the glasses and handed her one. She took a sip, licking the droplets from her lip, tempting him to ravish those lush curves. There was a look in her eyes that had him raising a brow in question.

“What is it?”

“There is something I have been thinking about. I was not certain how to broach the topic.”

“Simply tell me.”

She took a healthy gulp of her drink before resting it on the table. Prue went over to the chair she’d occupied and plucked up the book thumbing through the pages. Her face lit up when she found what she sought. Hurrying over to him, she tapped the page. “This...I want to try this with you.”

The damn minx had not prepared him. Every nerve in his body burned with instant lust.

“Where did you get this book?”

“From the club. I have been...perusing the pictures. It was my guide in seducing you.”

*Bloody hell.* The woman in the picture kneeled before a gentleman, and she held half of his cock in her hand and the other half in her mouth. “Prue...”

*Fuck.* His thoughts simply vanished as she dropped to her knees and peeked provocatively up at him from beneath her lashes.

“Yes, husband?”

A dark, wicked lust rushed through him. Gathering her hair in his hands, he twined the tresses in his fingers. “Suck me into that sweet, pretty mouth of yours,” he murmured.

A fine trembling cascade through her body, but her eyes were bright with desire and excitement. His wife was an adventuress. A damn sensual, beautiful one. She opened the flap of his trousers, and his cock sprung out, already hard and aching.

When her lips touched him, he groaned, his fingers tightening in her hair. Another slow glide of her tongue from the tip of his cock to the root. His damn knees trembled. Her mouth swallowed the flared head of his cock, her tongue stroking and caressing as her mouth suckled at the engorged head, piercing him with exquisite pleasure. Oh, that was delicious, he was fighting the sensual reactions that shot through him.

*Sweet mercy.*

Oscar pulled from his wife's mouth, hauled her up and lifted her into his arms.

"I need you," he said tightly, already desperate to be in her body. Tumbling with her to the chaise, he widened her legs and came down between them. Penetration was immediate. And Prue was ready for him and was wet and so damn tight she almost choked his release from him.

He paused and stared down into her face. An alien tenderness scraped at his insides, and his heart started to jerk an erratic beat. "Prue..." His damn throat closed. Oscar didn't know what he wanted to say. Hell, he wasn't even sure he understood what he felt at this moment.

*Belonging.*

That was it. Dipping his head, he claimed her mouth in a kiss and started to move within her. He loved the moans that poured from her and how she wrapped her body around him, offering herself to him so completely. He speared his fingers into her hair, clenching into the silky strands as he took her mouth and body. Showing her with passion what he was not able to express in words.

## Chapter Thirteen

Prue peeked over her easel, wanting to see whatever Oscar was painting but determined not to distract his rapt concentration. They had decided to spend the morning in the gardens as it was such a bright and glorious day. The sun was out, the profusion of flowers were at their best, their perfume delighted her, and the birds fluttered about in the gardens making the scene enchanting. They were not in the country; however, the back gardens of their townhouse were rather lovely and large enough for them to picnic outside and set up wicker chairs and easels to paint.

Prue had always been poor at watercolors. She bit back her smile, fearing his judgement on her artistic efforts, her aptitude seemed so meagre in comparison to his extraordinary talent. She was anxious about what he would think upon seeing her artwork, she had chosen to portray Cleopatra as she lazed in the sun on the lush green grass. It was as if the feline knew she was much admired and remained still to allow herself to be painted. Prue hadn't the heart to tell her husband that she was atrocious at painting, one of her many failings, according to her governess and tutors. Once he saw her efforts, the truth would make itself evident.

They had been outside for almost two hours, and Oscar was serenely concentrated as he swiped his brush in graceful strokes over his canvas. A rush of mischief gripped her, and leaning over, Prue dabbed the end of her brush in the pigments he had prepared for her earlier, walked over and drew a line under his cheek. Oscar

glanced at her and Prue chuckled at his wholly befuddled expression.

He wiped at the spot and his fingers came away with green color. "What are you doing, countess?"

"I am playing with you, husband. No need to look so perturbed."

"I am a man of two and thirty. I do not play games."

"Oh, ancient one," she said gravely. "We must remedy that right away." Prue then drew a line on his nose. His narrowed gaze was the only warning she got before he lunged at her. With a shriek of laughter, she dropped the brush on the grass and attempted to dart away. He grabbed her about the waist, spinning her around. His eyes gleamed with devilry, and then he started tickling her. *Oh, blast!*

"Mercy," she cried, laughing uncontrollably. "Mercy!"

"That can only be gained with kisses, madam."

"Then a kiss you shall have, my lord." With a laugh, she wrapped her arms around his neck and lifted her mouth.

"What is the meaning of this ruckus?" An imperious voice snapped.

Prue froze and snapped her head around to see how who intruded on their perfect paradise. *Blast.* It was his mother, the dowager Countess of Wycliffe, who wore an expression of appalled alarm. Outside of that, she appeared the picture of robust health. The dowager countess was gowned in a lovely dove gray silken gown, her dark hair showing no hint of gray upswept in an artful chignon. Prue had often wondered if the dowager's hair color owed its depth to some secret alchemical substance or possibly to the chanting of unholy spells. Her face bore little traces of age, though Prue knew her to be a lady of one and fifty. Prue's cheeks heated, and she stepped from his arms, aware that his mother had not truly approved of her to be a match for their family.

"Mother," he said dryly. "I was romping with my wife, an interlude I was enjoying."

She harrumphed, her gaze pinning Prue in place. However, she noted a warm amusement had entered his mother's eyes. As if she had liked catching them in their intimate cavorting.

"Good afternoon, Prudence," she said. "You have a wonderful glow about you. Is the family to expect news?"

What news? Prue glanced up at Oscar, who had narrowed his gaze in a warning.

"Mother," he said. "Why are you here?"

That was the reminder she needed for her hand to flutter to her bosom. Suddenly she looked out of sorts. "It is your sister."

"Which one?"

"Cecelia."

Oscar had three sisters, Julia, Amanda, and the youngest, Cecelia. Prue stepped forward. "Is she well, my lady?"

"I fear there is a dreadful scandal in the making, and we must get ahead of it. She has left her husband. The stubborn chit will not listen to a word of reasoning from me."

"Hell," Oscar muttered under his breath, scrubbing a hand over his face. "Where is she?"

"She is here. I demanded that she accompany me to visit you, after being in my home for a week."

"A week?"

His mother looked away briefly. "I thought I could handle the matter on my own. I never thought my youngest could be this frightfully obstinate! You must get her to return home as a matter of great urgency, Oscar."

His expression carefully composed, he said, "Let us retire to the drawing-room."

His mother turned and walked away. Prue felt his worry, and she touched his hand. "Go see to your family. I will ensure this is all packed up. I will join you after informing the housekeeper to send in refreshments."

Her husband briefly brushed his mouth against her, rousing a sweet longing in her heart. He disappeared through the terrace

door, and she scooped Cleopatra in her arms, stroking the cat. Cecelia was only a few years older than Prue, and they had grown close during her time in the country. The other girl had always been amiable and good-natured. Since Cecelia's marriage to Viscount Redburn, they had only exchanged the occasional letter. Prue instinctively trusted that her friend would have an exceptional reason for acting in this manner. She would not casually put her family under scrutiny.

Hurrying to direct the servants to pack their painting tools and the picnic, Prue instructed their housekeeper to prepare refreshments. Walking toward the drawing-room, she slowed her steps as a raised voice filtered through the door. Looking around, she dismissed a servant who was placing flowers in a vase on the hallway table. Servants were prone to gossip, and Oscar would be furious should a scandal about his family get out through one of his staff. She knew they were loyal, but it was better to take every precaution against loose talk.

"What do you mean I should return home to my husband! He is a wretch who has broken my heart! I wrote him the loveliest poem sharing my feelings. He read it and locked it away in his top drawer."

Cecelia's voice came passionately through the door. Her voice was faintly accusing as if Oscar were responsible for her heartbreak.

"Cecelia," he said patiently. "Your husband not returning your sentiments is not sufficient cause for these tears and tantrums. Marriage is not about sentimentality."

Opening the door, Prue entered the lavishly furnished drawing-room.

"Prudence," she cried, jerking to her feet. "I am terribly glad you are here!"

"Cecelia," she said, hurrying over to her. "Are you well?"

Her face a mask of misery, she shook her head. "My beast of a brother refuses to acknowledge my pain and support me."

Prue glanced at his inscrutable expression, noting that his mother reposed on a chaise with a vinaigrette of smelling salts in her hand. The dowager duchess was either being overly dramatic, or something horrible had occurred. Prue felt as if a knot were tightening low in her belly, tugging taut. She was expected to support her husband. That was where her loyalty stood; however, something Cecelia had said resounded painfully within her. Still, she had to tread with care for all the heated emotions of the family members involved.

She took in the pathos that Cecilia had affected. She had always been the most spirited of the family and was of a romantic disposition. Her delicate pastel blue gown harked back to more medieval fashions, as if seeking to play a role in scenes of courtly love.

“Have you found out that Redburn might have taken a mistress?” She asked.

“Good heavens, no! Nothing as alarming like that.”

“Yet you have walked out of your home,” Prue said gently. “If it is not all that dire, perhaps you might reconsider returning home.”

“Mama has exaggerated. I have not run away. I am merely visiting her for an extended period.”

Her mother spoke without looking at her child. “Your husband has visited thrice now, pleading with you to come home. He does not approve of this supposed visit, Cecelia.”

“Hang what he approves of,” she cried. “I married in good faith. Julia says I am a silly watering pot because I am with child, but it is more than that. I...I...” Another bout of tears poured forth.

Oscar went over to her and rested a hand on her shoulders. “You are with child, Cecelia?”

“Yes.”

“Congratulations,” he said with a small smile. “It is even more imperative that you put a stop to this nonsense.”

“It is not nonsense,” Prue and Cecilia said in unison.

She tossed Prue a grateful smile, clearly relieved to have her

support.

Oscar's expression shuttered. "I am not certain you know what is happening, countess."

"From what I overheard; I perceive that Cecelia does not believe her husband to have genuine tender affections for her. Redburn treats her with cordiality, but there is little outward show of...love," Prue said, her chest aching.

The dowager countess made a small, disapproving noise behind pursed lips. How similar their plights were. However, Prue was certain her husband now held considerable affection for her. They spent each night entangled in each other's arms, they indulged in long fascinating conversations that always ended in mutual and carnal pleasure. At last night's ball, he had danced only with Prue, and he had complimented her on her looks, her gown and how neatly she had danced. She was proud that he had finally made some time in his busy schedule to be able to attend the opera with her and to escort her to the museum. She had made great progress in turning around the vacuum of her marriage.

What or who did Cecelia have to support her if she was feeling so utterly wretched?

"You were eavesdropping?" he asked coolly.

She lifted her chin. "Shamelessly. I confess it, husband."

A small hiccupping laugh came from Cecelia as her gaze volleyed between Prue and Oscar. "Prudence is a part of the family. It does not matter if she eavesdrops. I will not return home to that beast, and I will not—"

"Cecelia!" Oscar's voice cracked like a whip, and his sister instantly quieted and struggled to gain a modicum of self-control.

"Your husband has no obligation to return any sentiments merely because you wrote him a poem. That you have acted in this manner over such rigmarole shows your total lack of maturity, and the reason he has had to call on mother on three occasions is due to his humiliated embarrassment at your lack of proper decorum. Surely you see, Cecelia, Redburn cares for you, but he is a sensible



man, not given to dealing with lachrymose effusions of emotion. Do you expect him to wear his heart on his sleeve and change his very nature?"

His sister's cheeks reddened, and she stared at him in wordless mortification.

"This is a private matter between you and your viscount. Discuss it with him in a rational manner. If he does not express any tendre, it does not make him a damn beast."

The dowager gasped in shock that he had dared to curse in her presence. Oscar continued as if he was unaware of her displeasure, "Redburn respects and cares for you. I will go as far as to say he admires you. I have seen it in the way he looks at you and how he speaks of you. Those are the foundations of an excellent marriage. You are risking destroying that. Do not act the fool to be expecting more or for the viscount to act like a lovesick swain."

"And that is what you feel for Prudence? Admiration?" Cecelia snapped.

Prue froze, her heart suddenly pounding. She hoped, he would explain that she meant more to him than that.

"My wife and I understand each other. That is all that matters," he said with cool authority. "Now stiffen your spine and prepare to return home. Mother will travel with you, so you do not make a cake of yourself."

Cecelia's lips wobbled, and she pressed a hand over her mouth, closing her eyes. Still, the tears spilled over her cheeks.

Hurt bubbled inside Prue's throat. Her husband did not believe in love. Worse, he thought that such sentiments were for fools. What did that mean for their marriage? Pushing away thoughts of herself, Prue went over to Cecelia and offered a comforting smile. "Perhaps we could take a turn in the gardens, Cecelia. The fresh air will be wonderful for you."

Her husband nodded his approval, and Prue escorted Cecelia outside. She was still sobbing in soft mewling, and the wretched sound broke Prue's heart.

“I am sorry, Cecelia. I know how difficult it can be when it comes to matters of the heart. It is easy to be bruised when someone we love—”

Cecelia rounded on her. “What do you know about it? Spare me your condescension. As my brother said, you and he have an understanding. You needed to marry up, and he needed your money. Some people marry for more than an arrangement! It is not always about money or political connections!”

Prue’s heart shattered. The very idea sounded absurd. “Oscar did not marry me for...for my wealth,” she said softly, hating the doubts suddenly crashing over her in unrelenting waves. “He...I... he was being honorable in rescuing me from scandal because we were found in a compromising position through no fault of his own.”

Cecelia’s lips shaped an O of surprise. “Prudence...I...please forgive my wayward tongue. When he said you and he had an understanding, I assumed you knew the full truth of the matter. It is not as if it were a secret. Everyone knew that is why he choose you.”

Prue stumbled back as if she had been violently shoved. Her chest hurt as if someone had stuck a hot poker inside, and for a precious moment, it felt as if she could not breathe. Struggling for equanimity, she said, “I did not know about it.”

Prue felt like a fool. He had said their marriage was a mutually beneficial arrangement. And she hated now that she understood that even after all their weeks of loving and learning each other, he had still been able to render their attachment to a mere ‘Prue and I have an understanding.’ Her throat burned with the need to cry, and despite the unintentional spite in Cecelia’s words, Prue wanted to help her.

“I have it on the highest authority that the way to a husband’s heart is through seduction.”

Cecelia’s eyes widened with surprise and then burned with hope. “Seduction?”

“Learning his thoughts...and his carnal desires and fulfilling them. Tempting him.”

“Is that what you did why Oscar looked at you with such warmth when you entered the drawing-room just now?”

Those words did not soothe the pain in her heart. Everything was now tainted. She had inadvertently done the one thing she had sworn not to do, marry a fortune hunter. She had convinced herself that her earl was better than that. A man of principle and honor. But she had been wrong, he had only wanted the money that had purchased her family a title. Such a man would never have seen the woman before him, for it would never be in her that his interest lay. And now she understood even more why for long three years she had been an ant he could walk past and ignore.

Her lips trembled when she said, “I do have a few books I can loan you. Be warned they are scandalous. But they did offer me some insight.”

“Oh, yes, please! I would like to borrow them.”

Prue nodded, desperate to get away from the cheery loveliness of the gardens. “I will see that they are discreetly delivered to your home. If you will excuse me, Cecelia. I wish you all the best.”

She whirled and hastened away, ignoring the call of her name. Prue needed to be alone, and she wanted to be anywhere but at this place. To her dismay, the wretched tears spilled over, and she dashed them away, for they made her pain and embarrassment evident. She had possibly led herself to more heartache than she could ever bear. For there had been a time when they were equal in sentiments with little threat to her heart. But because of her loneliness, she had dared. And now she was so in love with him, while he...

Love was for fools, and her husband was no fool.

## Chapter Fourteen

Prue arrived at her parents' home in Russell Square an hour after slipping from her home. She did not bid the dowager countess farewell or inform her husband where she was going. Prue did not call for the carriage or wait for it to be readied. She had simply collected her pelisse and bonnet and set out to walk to her parents' townhouse.

"There is no need to announce me, Jameson," she said, entering her parents' home and smiling at the butler.

"Very well, Lady Wycliffe."

"Is my mother at home?"

"Mrs. Merriweather and Mrs. Walters went out for a stroll. You only missed them by a few minutes, Your Ladyship."

So Temperance was in town. Prue frowned, for she had not received any correspondence from her sister that she was visiting town for the season. She hoped all was well with her. Only last year, she'd had her second child, a lovely girl that looked so much like her mother. A surprising pang of yearning shot through her as an image of a child with Oscar's eyes and smile roused in her thoughts.

"Thank you, Jameson. I presume my father is in his study?"

"Yes, Your Ladyship."

Prue handed over her bonnet and pelisse and padded down the hallway to the study. She knocked on the door and entered when her papa's gruff voice bid her entry. Her papa glanced up, surprise and then pleasure suffusing on his face.

“Prudence,” he cried heartily, standing up and coming around the desk. In the two months since she had last seen him, he had gained some weight around his middle, but he was still the picture of health and vitality at nine and forty. His hair now had greyer streaks and looked particularly distinguished. A very handsome papa too with green eyes just like hers, and a ready smile for everyone. His apparel was made by the best tailor, but his taste was slightly more colorful than the current fashions.

Papa sported a waistcoat of red damask, embroidered with what appeared to be prancing dogs and unicorns in several garish hues. He wore a matching red Belcher neckcloth although he would have a more correct one tied when he expected company. Her father was a man who was aware of society’s expectations but who preferred comfort in his own home. He was prepared to play the part of a gentleman in public, even though he admitted to his family that it was a sham designed to support his business interests and to not embarrass his daughters who had married above his class.

Prue was proud that her papa was a shrewd businessman who had come from a humble beginning but was a man of great wealth today.

He enfolded her into his arms, and she returned his hug, basking in the comforting embrace, hating that intolerable ache once more, tightening her throat.

“Come, come, have a seat. I shall ring for some refreshment. You just missed your mother and sister. They have gone to call on Aunt Beatrice.”

She sat on a comfortable sofa. “I would prefer sherry, papa. Not tea.”

He jolted, clearly startled. “You are a countess,” he said, “If you want sherry, you shall have it.”

Prue smiled at him, recalling her sister’s promise that if she married a title, Prue would be the jewel in her papa’s eyes. He handed her a glass, and she wrapped her finger around it, unable

to drink. "Papa?"

"Yes, poppet?"

"Did...did the Earl of Wycliffe marry me for my fortune?"

In the act of pouring a drink for himself, her papa froze. His back was to her, so she was unable to see his expression. Prue felt like she wanted to weep. "Papa?"

He slowly turned. "Why do you ask this now. You have been married for years."

"I asked when Lord Wycliffe, and you said these were matters between men."

"Bah! He married you because you are a beautiful miss. A bright and rare jewel that shone in a ballroom filled with lackluster diamonds. I remember your romantic notions, be happy you have a lord doting on you."

She knew her papa's and his skills at deflection. Taking a sip of the sherry, she composed her thoughts. "How much money was I worth to the earl?"

"Prudence—" her father began warningly.

"Papa, please," she said, standing. "Do not prevaricate. Tell me!"

"Your dowry was always very handsome, young lady. We turned down more than a dozen offers for your hand in a week."

She flinched as if struck. Yes, they had, but her parents had so desperately wanted an elevated title in the family that they had waited for the bigger shark to ask. "How handsome, papa?"

"Five hundred thousand pounds."

"That was very generous of you, papa." A fortune, and without that lure, the earl would never have looked at a young girl of seventeen who was pretty enough but with little connection to nobility. There had been far prettier ladies there that night with more respectable and lofty connections, but her purse had been the biggest. She tried her best to show an indifferent countenance to papa's revelation and adroitly changed the subject to Temperance. Her father reassured Prue that her sister was well and that she had

even mentioned calling upon her tomorrow. She spent an hour chatting with her papa and played a game of chess which she won before she kissed him on his cheek and bid him *adieu*.

PRUE ARRIVED a short time later at 48 Berkeley Square with silent tears streaking down her cheeks. Dashing them away with a furious swipe, she handed over her pelisse and hat to the butler. Then she made her way to the private parlor Theo claimed as hers. Knocking gently, Prue entered when a soft voice bid her welcome. Theo lowered the teacup onto a small table before her. "Prue! How lovely to you see. I've missed your presence these last several days."

Her mass of blonde hair tumbled over her shoulders to her hips, and her whisky-colored brown eyes warmed with delight. Theo had the appearance of a woman happy with her lot in life, very different from how she had been only a few weeks ago. Prue's opinion of the cold and arrogant duke who had practically kidnapped her friend instantly changed. Since he had placed that happy contentment on her friend's face. Prue would love the man too and claim him as her friend.

"Do you plan to simply stand there?" Theo asked with an arched brow.

Prue sniffed, closed the door behind her and sauntered into the room. "I have not seen you in over three weeks, and I missed you dreadfully."

"And that has caused your eyes to be puffy from tears?"

"The cause of that is my wretched husband, who I have been wooing. Perhaps in vain, I discovered today. I feel like a ninny to be crying."

Theo smiled warmly. "Come, let's have us a chat and some tea with a dollop of whisky added."

A laugh hiccupped from Prue, and she sat beside her friend on the comfortable sofa. Some of the tension eased from her, and with a sigh, she toed off her shoes, leaned forward, and rolled down her

stockings. She then removed the pins from her hair and shook her head to allow her hair to tumble down her shoulders and back. There. Now she felt a measure of peace.

Theo handed her a cup of tea, and she took a sip, tasting the whisky in the brew. It warmed her, and she relaxed even more.

“Tell me what is weighing on you?”

“Oh, Theo, I feel so wretched to be bringing my woes to your doorstep when we should only be celebrating your happy nuptials. Both you and Perdie are married and wonderfully happy. I should not—”

“It is for that very reason you should be crying on my shoulder,” Theo said warmly. “I am *blissfully* happy when you are clearly miserable.”

“You should be leaving today for your honeymoon,” Prue said stubbornly, even though she wanted to unburden her fears. There was an uncertainty upon her heart she did not fully understand.

“Prudence,” Theo said firmly. “We are more than friends. We are sisters. Your worries are mine, and I am glad they are. Now tell me why there is hurt in your eyes.”

She closed her fingers tightly around the teacup and took a shaky breath. “I...I did not know Wycliffe needed an heiress when he came across me in the gardens.”

Theo’s eyes widened. “I never heard any rumors that his estates were in trouble. If that was the truth, it was a tightly guarded secret.”

“It hurts, Theo, and I feel...uncertain. I never wanted a man to marry me only for my money.”

Theo squeezed her hands in silent support.

“I thought...I was just so naïve.” Resting the cup on the table in front of her, she drew her knees up on the edge of the sofa and wrapped her arms around them, resting her chin on the top of her joined knees. “I never thought to question why an earl would connect himself to a family with such humble connections and so readily. I thought he was just an honorable gentleman rescuing me



from scandal. But I see now that is only what I wanted to see. When I spoke to him of love then, he has been so dismissive.”

*Love... how naïve. A marriage connection has nothing to do with love. Your limited views and understanding of how the world operates will change as you mature.*

Even now, she recalled with clarity his cutting words and almost amused countenance.

“Oscar had mentioned that our marriage was a mutually beneficial arrangement. At the time, I did not understand how it benefited him, and I should have known! I am not an outstanding beauty or a woman of great wit. The only thing I had of worth then was my substantial dowry. And he...he married me for it and then left me alone for three years. If I had not accepted Charity’s dare to seduce him, that divide might still be between us.”

Theo shifted to curl her feet beneath her thighs on the sofa. “Regrettably, he married you for money, but do not forget he also rescued you from ruin. From what you told me, the possibility of the scandal was high, and your Aunt Beatrice would have done everything in her power, even ruining you, to ensure you netted a title and an earl is an excellent catch. I’m afraid you would not have escaped that trap even if you had known his intentions.”

Prue saw the truth of Theo’s words. Still, there was a heavy press upon her heart that would not go away. It was quite difficult to put the agony of doubt into words, and Prue suddenly saw the only solution was speaking with her husband maturely. “I must speak to Wycliffe,” she said, standing. “I...I want to understand what he feels for me now.”

Theo also stood, her expression concerned. “Prue, are you wondering if he loves you?”

She firmed her lips, so they did not tremble. “Yes.”

“And what if he does not?”

She flinched and Theo sighed. “Oh, Prue. Not all gentlemen are capable of finer sentiments. When I saw you last week at the opera, you were glowing. That tells me he treats you kindly and with

respect.”

“I want more,” she said hoarsely.

“He might not be able to offer more, and you would have to accept that—”

She fisted her palms as the ache welled deep inside her. “Would you have accepted less from your duke, Theo? Would you have married Hartford if he had not loved you?”

A lengthy silence rife with tension settled in the small parlor.

Theo’s eyes had widened. “The only reason I married Hartford was that he promised me the world...and such love...I....” Her throat worked on a swallow. “I understand, Prue. There was a moment I thought I did not matter to Sebastian, that I was only... an affair, and my heart shattered, for I was in love with him, desperately so. I did not want to be alone in my feelings. Alone in my love. I’d even thought at one time that it might take me a lifetime to recover from the pain of not having Sebastian’s love in return.”

Prue swiped away the tear that trekked down her cheek. “Precisely so.” To be alone in her love for him while he remained indifferent to it was unbearable.

She hugged her friend, made herself presentable with Theo’s assistance to rearrange her hair and went home.

BEFORE APPROACHING HER HUSBAND, Prue took a long bath and donned a simple but stylish beautiful light green dress. She left her hair loose to tumble down her back, and she wore no shoes. Padding down the hallway in her bare feet, she first checked the study and found it empty. Her next stop was the library, and there she found him seated behind his large desk, bent over a mountain of papers. She must have made a sound, for he glanced up, and his brown eyes warmed with welcome.

“I missed you at dinner. I thought you might have gone to your club.”

Prue sauntered further into the room, closing the door behind

her. "I paid a call at my parents' townhouse. Then after, I went to 48 Berkeley Square."

His gaze skipped over her face, and with a frown, he lowered the quilt. "You have been crying."

She waved a hand dismissively. "That is not of import."

He stood and moved from around the desk. "My wife's tears and the reason for her upset is very important to me," he said coolly. "What happened?"

Her husband sounded as if he would crush the person he believed to have hurt her. She almost laughed at the irony. Oscar slipped his hands around her waist and drew her close. That look in his eyes and the sensual tenderness of his touch caused a breathless exhilaration to scythe through her, and Prue had to suppress the feelings.

That tenderness in his eyes when he noted the ravages of tears on her face. This close it could not be ignored. "Are you hurt?"

*My heart feels shredded.* But she could not say so, of course. Prue lifted her hand to her cheek, startled to feel wetness. She had thought all the tears had been shed on the carriage ride home.

"Tell me," he said gruffly. "What is wrong?"

Her lips trembled. "Because you'll slay my dragon and defeat all my enemies?"

"Always."

Firelight flickered in the dark brown pool of his eyes as he peered down at her. "Did you marry me because I...I ...I was an heiress?"

Her voice was a mere whisper, but he stiffened. His expression shuttered but not before she read the truth of it. Prue recoiled, taking several steps back. He did not follow her, and she was grateful for it. The very thing she had not wanted was to marry a fortune hunter or a man whose only desire of her was her dowry.

"I've had the wrong expectations of my marriage for the last three years," she said hoarsely. "If I had known...if I had known you decided to marry me only for my wealth, I would have braved

the scandal of a ruined reputation.”

She closed her eyes against the sharp memory of falling, of feeling helpless and unhappy, and then he was there. Her honorable rescuer, who in truth had only approached her for selfish motives. She must have presented as such easy prey. “Did you follow me that night into the gardens?”

He scrubbed a hand over his face. “Of course not. I simply wanted to breathe from the crush and stumbled upon your mishap.”

“Was it in honor that you chose to offer for me?”

“I offered for you because I quickly analyzed the situation and saw where we could enter a mutually beneficial marriage. Your reputation needed saving, and I, unfortunately, needed to marry an heiress to save the family.”

The hurt spread from her heart and blossomed everywhere. Unwelcome tears welled in her eyes, and she blinked to keep them back. “You only forgot to tell me about it,” she whispered. “If you did, I would have never owned such unrealistic expectations of you...of us...and made an utter fool of myself in trying to seduce you into loving me.”

Her husband jolted before his entire body stilled. “You did not make a fool of yourself.”

“Then, do you love me?” Such brave words when he had the power to cut her heart to ribbons.

“Prue...bloody hell, what is this?”

“Answer me, my lord.”

“I feel so *much* for you.” He raked his fingers through his hair.

“But not love.”

He slashed his hand in the air, almost violently. “What is love? And why the hell does it matter between two people who respect each other, have a healthy sexual relationship, and have fun together? What is this ridiculous insistence on love? It is but a word, Prue. Are we less without it? Are we more? You are my damn wife, my countess, and that is what matters!”

*It is but a word.*

“When you take me to your bed and touch me with such passion and tenderness...and such intensity...what is that?”

“It is the natural and healthy desire I own for you and what you also own for me.”

*Why did that hurt?*

“Prue,” he said gruffly, his eyes searching every nuance of her face. “Tell me what you want? I will...I will do my damndest to give it to you.”

*Are we less without it? Are we more?* Her husband was simply a man who did not believe in love, and she had to learn how to adjust the hopes she had for her marriage. Many people in the *ton* had successful marriages that were not based on sentiment.

“I daresay you are not capable of giving it. Now, if you will excuse me, I shall grab a book from the library to read before retiring to bed,” she said coolly.

For she would be damned if she crumpled before him. It was her foolish expectations that had led her to this pain. He had never made any promises, except when he gave his marriage vows. Then he had promised to love and honor her as his wife. Yet after uttering those traditional words, he had never told her, he loved her. So, how could she resent him for her naivety? Prue walked away, maintaining her dignity. At the top of the stairs, her knees buckled, and she clutched the banister for support. She needed space and time alone to mourn the loss of the hope she had lived with for so long. Oscar was her husband and would forever be her husband. He treated her with kindness and respect, and that should have to be enough. Many *ton* marriages had less, and though many also had more—burning love and unquenchable passion, she would have to accept what Oscar was willing to give.

Those reasonings sounded logical. Reasonable. Yet her throat burned with the ache of unshed tears, and she wanted to curl into a ball and wept.

*This intolerable pain will pass. Surely it will pass. And then we will*

*go on as before.*

Except Prue did not believe she would be able to hide her emotions, telling him that she loved only for him to remain indifferent to her sentiments. Even if she never voiced the words to him, that wound cut her deeply. She did not want to live in a loveless marriage but there was nothing else she could do. She had married Oscar and he was her husband and even if he fell short of her romantic dreams, she like Cecilia would have to find a way to live with it.

No, she would have to shore up her emotions behind a strong stone wall lest they tore her heart apart, day by day.

## Chapter Fifteen

Two days after his wife's quiet exit from the library, Oscar realized something was bloody wrong. It wasn't that Prue was angry that she had not known he required a fortune to re-establish his family fortunes. He had never seen such hurt in her gaze before, and he had placed it there. *God damn it!* He rubbed the spot over his chest that ached like a physical ailment.

There was something different in her eyes. They no longer glowed or shone brightly with her hopes and dreams. Her mouth smiled but only so far and the smile did not reach her eyes. She touched and joined him in his bed with the same desperate passion they had enjoyed with each other, but afterward, she did not curl up into his embrace and fall asleep in his arms, instead she slipped from his bed and retired to her room. Shutting the door between them softly.

Tonight, he had been to White's, but he had been unable to concentrate on any of the conversation around him. The words had swum around him, and he had not contributed to the discussions. He had nursed his brandy and departed early. Reaching home after one in the morning, Oscar had retired to his chamber, discovering that the constant ache and doubt in his heart made him irritable. Now that he was home, he could not sleep, and that nameless restlessness still plagued him.

Oscar's bed felt cold. He wanted his wife beside him...always. He sighed, rubbing his jaw. He pushed off the bed, grabbed his banyan and tied the sash. Then he padded over to the connecting

door, but he did not open it. An unknown emotion stirred violently inside his chest. Wrenching the door open, he walked over to his wife's bed and saw that it was empty.

Oscar made his way from his room and down the winding stairs to the lower floors. A light shone from beneath the library door. Opening it, he faltered as his eyes fell upon his wife. She was curled in an overstuffed armchair in front of the fire, with an open book loosely gripped in her clutches. She was sleeping.

Careful not to wake her, he curved one of his hands under her shoulder and the other at her hip and lifted her, taking his countess to her bedchamber. Quietly shutting the door behind him. Once he had carried her safely inside, he placed her on the bed and tucked the covers around her. Oscar did not return to his chamber but shed his banyan and slipped in beside her.

"Why are you here?" she asked grumpily and sleepily.

"It feels cold without you," he admitted softly.

She made no answer, and they lay together in the dark as the time ticked by in endless minutes. They seemed to shift closer at the same time and met in the middle. Prue ended up wrapped around him like a vine. Her cheeks against his chest, and her legs hung around his hips. A deep contented sigh went through him, and he pressed a kiss to the top of her head. As he drifted off to sleep, he felt the dampness on his chest and realized his countess silently wept.

The touch of those tears on his chest cut deep into his heart. Worse, he felt like he was losing a part of her that he could not live without. *Stop being a damn whimsical arse*, he scolded himself, staring into the dark ceiling. Yet Oscar could not escape the feeling that if he did not try to understand his countess, he might lose her forever.

That thought he could not fucking bear.

THE VERY NEXT MORNING, Oscar stared at his butler with total incomprehension.



“I beg your pardon?”

“Her ladyship left this letter for you, my lord. She instructed me to hand it to you tonight, but I...I decided not to wait.”

*Tonight?* A glance at the hallway clocked revealed it was only two p.m. Oscar took the letter with a frown and walked down to his study. This morning he had not broken his fast with her, for he had to leave early on business matters with his bankers. Tearing the letter open, he read it.

*Dear Oscar,*

*I have decided to withdraw to the country for the remainder of the season. I do hope you enjoy your stay in town. I believe it prudent to mention I will not be at your country seat, should you be alarmed to not find me there should you visit.*

*Yours,*

*Lady Wycliffe.*

The note was succinct and lacking the warmth and liveliness he had come to associate with his wife. A peculiar dread clawed its way into his body and dug into his heart. Painfully. She was not retiring to their country home. Prue had not even mentioned where she traveled. He noted what the letter did not say, charming words in the vein that she had bestowed on him last week whenever they parted. It was as if she had once again retreated inside a shell, only he feared this one was not from shyness but profound hurt.

The agonizing awareness caused him to stumble as the realization pierced him.

*Do you not believe in love?*

Now he understood the ache in her voice when she'd asked that question on their return journey from Hyde Park. He scrubbed a hand over his face. “Bloody hell.” His wife was in love with him, and he had not seen it. His heart pounded in a manner it never had before.

*Do you love me, Prue?*

Odd, he had not wondered before, but now a desperate need for her affection burned through his blood. Oscar closed his eyes, recalling the tender way she would brush the unruly lock of hair from his forehead. How she would teasingly kiss his nose down to his mouth. The way she returned his lovemaking with breathtaking passion and trust. The closeness between them when they slept together and how they chatted long into the night and shared all manner of subjects that had piqued their interests. They had not just discussed the weather as she had once teased.

There had been an increasingly warm look in her eyes that had warmed him daily. That look had been her growing love and admiration.

And what had he felt but a similar desperate ache that grew daily until it was like a vice around his heart? Once he saw her, his damn heart jerked before it calmed in a comforting way. A mere kiss from her could see him content for the day. And whenever he worked, he anticipated the end of his duties so he could spend time with his wife. What he felt for her extended to more than just protecting and caring for her. He had to see her smile. Had to see her happiness. And his damn chest hurt thinking of the wound he had dealt her that she would choose to put space between them again.

And he had hurt her because he had not paused to think about why it meant so much to her or why the idea of making an alliance with an heiress would ravage her so. He had been so dense, so foolish to fail to realize that his own happiness depended on her. Oscar had to see her. He could not bear her going a damn night, not knowing how he felt. If when he told her she still wanted to leave, he would give her that space no matter how much it killed him. She deserved everything she wanted to be happy.

Striding from the study and calling for his horse to be readied, he faltered in the hallway.

*Damn it all to hell.* He did not know where his wife was.

APPROXIMATELY TWENTY MINUTES LATER, Oscar was allowed entry to 48 Berkeley Square, a three-story townhouse, its interiors decorated with elegant femininity and grace. It was evident that a gentleman did not live at the premises, and he had yet to move from the hallway.

Striding down the hallway behind the butler, too impatient for the man to announce his presence, Oscar stopped. Five young ladies were running down the winding staircase, and when they saw him, they skidded to an alarming halt, their expressions varying degrees of shock and curiosity.

“My lord,” a pert voice said. “I was not at home to callers.”

The imperious lift of her chin and haughty expression on her lovely face clued him into her identity. She was also vaguely familiar. “Your Grace, I presume?”

She tossed back her hair, and he saw that the duchess wore no shoes, only silken stockings. “You presume correctly, Lord Wycliffe. Gentlemen are not allowed on the premises.”

“I will leave, as soon as you reveal the whereabouts of my countess.”

“I am not aware—”

“Prue would not have left without informing her...friends. Please do not insult me by pretending otherwise.”

The duchess gave him a critical once over.

“Are we to have this conversation in the hallway?” he snapped.

“Yes,” she said with a mocking smile. “I am sure when Prue is ready, she will send the appropriate correspondence informing you of her whereabouts.”

“I must see my wife today.”

Her gaze narrowed. “And why is that Lord Wycliffe?”

“There are important things that she must know that cannot wait.”

“What are those things?”

“None of your business, duchess,” he said flatly.

She flushed in apparent mortification. “How can I tell you

where she is when I do not know if you will cause her hurt by—”

“I would never deliberately hurt my wife in either words or deed. They are things that will let her know she is entirely necessary to my existence, and without her happiness and love, I am just a shadow of a man. I do not want her to sleep even one night believing things that are not true.”

The duchess graced him with a radiant smile while a few ladies who had paused on the stairs in various states of *deshabille* squealed.

*Bloody hell.* Oscar had forgotten their frozen and inquisitive audience. He carefully did not look at them to preserve their modesty, even though the quick glance earlier had only shown loose hair and bare feet.

“She is off to Kent to stay at a charming and peaceful cottage my husband owns. She is only ahead of you by an hour at most. I shall get the directions for you.”

The duchess then hurried away, still not inviting him to sit. He thought her refreshingly rude and honest. A few minutes later, he galloped down the streets of London and toward his wife.

PRUE DID NOT like that she was running away from facing Oscar for another night. It had proved too difficult to protect her heart when he took her into his bed and ravished her until she was limp with exhausted pleasure. How could she get inured to the man if she was around him daily and assaulted with such sensual pleasures? It was better she shut up her feelings away from the man, without his every touch and kiss hammering at the wall she had fought so determinedly to erect. She had been trying to give him what he wanted, to be his correct countess who would smile and make polite conversation and never expect anything more from him. They had married for their mutual benefit, and he had her money, and she had the title he had bestowed on her when

they married. She would do nothing to disgrace him, but she valued her dowry and his title less than a loving heart. She no longer found herself prepared to accept such a sterile existence. Better by far for them to live their own lives apart. Then she could grieve for the love that would never be and eventually her heart would harden and stop yearning for him and his caresses.

Even accepting all this, every jostle of the carriage over the ground reminded her that she was leaving him and would be apart from him. Perhaps for a few months, perhaps for longer, perhaps it would be forever. Her departure was necessary, and its reasons were sensible, she told herself over and over. She doubted that Oscar would miss her or even try to understand her reasons. Still, she had to leave and would take the time to heal herself. It was the correct decision, she told herself once more. Then the wretched tears would flow again.

She stiffened her spine as the carriage slowed. Brushing aside the carriage curtains, she barely made out the outline of a large figure on a horse riding alongside them. Her heart lurched at the thought they might have encountered a highwayman blasted through her.

“What is it, my lady?” her maid asked.

“I am not certain why we are slowing, Martha; surely we have not reached our destination already.”

Reaching over, she took up the cane, which held a hidden sword and firmly gripped it. The carriage stopped, and the door swung open, to reveal her husband, who faltered into profound stillness at finding the tip of a rapier at his throat.

“I should have known skewering a man was a part of your repertoire.”

That dry wit had her heart stuttering and a warm feeling settled deep and low in her belly. Her heart raced exquisitely as her joy at seeing him merged with the agonizing pain and loss at leaving him. She could not fully separate the tangled enigma of emotions she felt for the dratted man.

"I thought you might be a highwayman," she said defiantly, lowering the blade. She could not bear to look at him while she sheathed the rapier and asked, "Oscar, what are you doing?"

He hauled himself into the carriage to sit opposite her. A glance at her maid saw Martha scurrying from the carriage and closing the door behind her.

"Oscar, I—"

Her breath faltered as he traced the line of her cheek. His touch seemed tender, the stark lines of his face harsh with regret. Sudden hope rattled around inside her chest. Tamping the wild cravings stirring in her breast, she awaited his answer.

"I love you," he said simply, shocking her witless.

"I...*what?*"

"From a lad of eighteen, I knew my inheritance was in shambles. It was why I attended my studies so diligently. I needed all the knowledge I could get to turn it around. I have sold paintings and antiques to raise money for investments. They yielded handsome returns, but it was not enough. I knew from I was five and twenty that I needed to marry an heiress to help me. Yet it was not until years later I saw you that I felt that something different...and unexpected awakened inside me. I felt that, before I even knew you were a damn heiress."

*Oh!*

"Then I learned your age and thought 'she is too young for me.' I was a man of nine and twenty with varied experiences, and you were a chit fresh out of the schoolroom. I turned the other way and resolved to ignore you."

He reached into his coat and handed a small, framed picture of her.

"Look at it," he said gruffly.

Prue lowered her gaze to the portrait. It was of her, fresh-faced and laughing, standing near a pond in Kensington Gardens. Her heart squeezed. "This...this day was before my very first ball. My parents took me here only my second day of being out in London."

"This was the first time I saw you, and I still cannot explain what compelled me to paint you and keep this portrait in my bedchamber."

And she had never noticed it. Prue lifted her head to meet his stare. "Oscar—"

"I love you," he said again.

"You are not allowed to take it back!"

"Not even under torture, I would do so." He paused, seemingly searching for the right words to say before he just let it all out.

"I know it to be more than a damn word. It is the way my heart beats every day for you, Prue. It is the way I long for you five minutes after I leave your presence, and it is the way whenever we are together, it feels like peace...and happiness. I do not want polite distance and hurt between us ever. Just passion, love, trust, and friendship."

Her chest rose and fell raggedly. "You wretched beast, to make me have worried so!" She thumped his chest and embarrassed herself by sobbing.

"Forgive me, my wife, please," he murmured.

She flung herself at him and hugged her arms tightly around his neck. It was as if a dam holding all the pain, doubts, and fears she'd held inside her cracked, and she cried it out, her face buried in his throat. "I love you, Oscar. So very much."

"I am a fool for not realizing it sooner."

She sniffed delicately, gripping him even tighter as if she feared he might vanish. "Yes, you should." Something tender swelled inside her chest. Prue laughed and pulled back, staring up into his eyes. "You love me!"

A crooked smile slanted his face. "Certainly more than anything I could have ever imagined."

She rained kisses over his face, sighing when he kissed her deeply. Prue's heart so was happy she felt fit to burst. As he deepened his embrace, she thought, *'I love you, Oscar, with all my heart.'*

## Epilogue

Prue slipped from her husband's arms, sated with contentment.

They had spent the night wrapped in each other bodies, delighting in sensual pleasure. She was exhausted from their passionate fervor, yet she also felt exhilarated.

The warbling echo of a rare bird sounded again in the stillness of the night. The very insistent call which had roused her could only have been made from a member of their club. A quick glance at the clock showed it to be minutes after three in the morning. Oh, blast! Shoving the covers from her feet, Prue scrambled from the bed and hurried over to the windows that had been left open to counter the balmy night.

"Don't tell me your friends also have a secret signal?" Oscar murmured.

Muffling her laugh, Prue glanced around, noting he stared at her with lazy satisfaction and a wicked gleam.

"Yes, and you better get that look out of your eyes," she muttered before turning back and pushing up the partially open windows.

From the garden lanterns that remained lit throughout the night, Prue spied a slim figure that stood below dressed in black breeches and shirt. The hair was also covered in a black cap. Prue cleared her throat and that face tilted up.

"Charity?"

"Yes...it's me!"

Her friend's voice wobbled before she squared her shoulders.



"It is very late, and why are you dressed like that? Would you like to come inside?"

Charity shook her head.

"Then why are you here?"

"Your house is only a few houses down...I supposed I panicked."

Dread pooled low in Prue's belly. "A few houses down from where?"

A tense silence lingered, then her friend said, "I executed the dare tonight."

*Oh, blast!* "You broke into the Viscount's home?"

Charity nodded quickly.

"Bloody hell," Oscar muttered behind her.

"What happened? Did you get the letters?"

"Yes. I have them."

Prue wilted against the sill in relief. "Then what—"

"I was caught."

For precious seconds Prue was rendered speechless. "You were *what?*"

Charity glanced around frantically. "Keep your voice down, Prue!"

This was a disaster. Visions of scandal and ruination for her friend danced in Prue's head. Charity did not deserve this. "We will convince Lord Sallis—"

"It wasn't the viscount who caught me," Charity muttered.

Prue stared at her in incomprehension. "I...what do you mean?"

"There was someone else there in the blasted house with me... in the dark, and it was not the viscount!"

*Good God.*

Charity looked around once more as if the mystery man had followed her. Prue leaned through the window, looking out the empty streets. "Charity, I am not comfortable with you leaving. Please come inside."

"I am supposed to be at a ball. I should change back into my gown and return home." She took a deep breath. "I...I suppose my nerves were more shattered than I realized. I did not mean to disturb your rest. We will talk tomorrow."

Then her friend turned and gracefully ran off. Prue whistled sharply, and Charity stopped and hurried back.

"Yes?"

"Who was with you in the dark. Did you identify the person? More importantly, did they identify you?"

There was a slight hesitation, and to Prue's shock, Charity blushed fiercely. So it was a gentleman then. One who was also breaking into the viscount's house. What rotten luck.

"Who is he, Charity?" Prue asked again, impatience roiling inside.

Instead of answering, an odd smile...a bit mysterious, touched her friend's mouth before she turned around and melted into the shadows of the gardens.

*Blast!*

"Tomorrow, I am going to trounce her, to leave me with such anxiety!"

Oscar wrapped his hands around her waist, and she leaned her head against his chest. The wall of heat and muscles behind her was very comforting.

"I believe she was a bit shaken but is not really afraid. That possibly means she did not find this person's presence threatening. Another lady from your club taking on a dare?"

Prue frowned. "She blushed. The garden is barely lit, and I saw that blush, it was a gentleman, and I fear he bloody well took liberties!"

"Did she seemed scared or hurt?"

"No."

"Then trust that she is well and only startled."

He turned her around, and she rested her head against his chest. "I am still throttling her in the morning."

Oscar chuckled and pressed a kiss to her forehead. "Prue?"

"Hmm?"

"Will you do me the honor of going away with me for two weeks?"

She glanced up at him, astonished. He tenderly gripped her chin and gruffly said, "I never took you on a honeymoon. Let me take you away."

Prue smiled, happiness bursting in her heart. Tipping on her toes slightly, she kissed him. "Yes," she murmured against his mouth. "Take me away."

"I love you," Oscar replied, rubbing his nose gently against hers. "As much as I love Cleo."

He swallowed her laugh with a kiss that was at once tender and rousing.

"I love you, my wife."

"I love you too," she whispered achingly, smiling as he swept her into his arms and carried her over to their bed.

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## About Alyssa Clarke

Alyssa Clarke writes steamy Regency Historical Romances featuring swoon-worthy heroes and sassy, sometimes unconventional heroines! Her debut novel—Love me, If you Dare: Wagers and Wallflowers, came to her in a dream as a hot, fun enemy to lover romance where she played the leading lady who fell in love with a duke who looked remarkably like Henry Cavill.

When not writing, Alyssa enjoys hiking, games/movie night with her husband and two beautiful children, and her Siberian Husky—Cronus. She is a lover of wine, cheesecake, and more wine.

If you would like to keep up to date with her new releases, please sign up for her Newsletter, and follow her on Instagram, Bookbub, and Facebook. She also has a fan group [Alyssa's Coterie](#), which would be fun to join. In her Coterie you can receive Advance Reader Copies of her books!

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